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PRISONERS OF SILENCE

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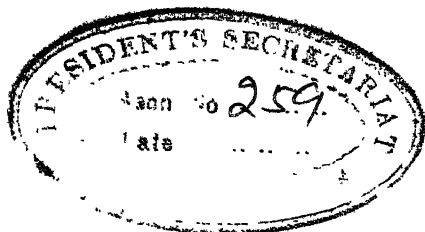
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PRISONERS OF SILENCE



BY

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"CROSS CURRENTS," ETC., ETC.

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PRISONERS OF SILENCE.

CHAPTER I.

It had been a dull, damp October day. The hours had worn one into another heavily and drearily ; weighted, as it were, with the moisture, intangible but all pervading, which seemed to shut out alike healthy air, invigorating light, and that elasticity which these bring to the spirit of mankind. The day was dying now, though it was only four o'clock in the afternoon ; and as the light waned, fading as something incongruous and incompatible with the raw, sad atmosphere, along the little river which ran through the small cathedral town up from the flat, grey-looking country, crept a cold white mist. The river ran through the poorest part of the town, and the mist crawled first through slums, passing in at open doors and broken windows, casting a deadly damp where was already the deadly chill of poverty, killing struggling little fires, searching through and through scanty garments to shivering frames. Up from the slums it passed, spreading and growing steadily and imperceptibly, into the busy thoroughfares, chilling the hope and the vigour out of the workers, hushing and blighting as it moved. On through the town to where the shops gave place to houses ; little villa residences, through the thin walls and ill-fitting doors and windows

of which it penetrated, insidious and all pervading. Out here, where there was little human warmth and little light to temper it, it gathered force and volume, as though the genius of the long brooding day had taken form at last and risen in resistless power. On up the hill it swept, shrouding and blotting out the better houses it encountered, until it reached the summit.

On the brow of the hill, just where the road turned, a green palisade ran along by the pavement enclosing a garden, and some two or three hundred yards further on, a house, which loomed out in the dusk, square and white. Noiselessly and imperceptibly the palisade was blotted out. Up the garden the mist stole, slowly, very slowly, rolling itself out now like some impalpable winding-sheet; creeping on and on until the square white house rose up grey and gloomy from its very midst. Here on the top of the hill the impulse which had rolled it up from the river ceased. It spread no further, except as it grew thinner in the distance and dispersed. It seemed to stop at the white house, round which it hung heavy and clinging. There was the slightest possible stir in the air up here—all insufficient to be called a breeze, all insufficient to break up the mist. But it was enough to stir it slightly, to produce a hardly perceptible fluctuation in its density, to give it a strange effect of stealthy, creeping movement. Round and round the house it seemed to steal, to and fro; pressing itself against the walls; crawling up and along windows and doors; with a haunting suggestion in its shadowy restlessness as of some weird, half palpable presence that sought an entrance.

A few bricks, a pane or so of glass. On the other side of this slight barrier was a picture of placid, commonplace comfort; which, in the very sharpness of the contrast it presented, emphasized into that grotesque-

ness which is never without a touch of the terrible, the grim suggestion shut out by warm curtains and bright lights. It was a square room, fairly large. It was furnished as a drawing room ; not as the idea obtains in fashionable London, but according to the canons of country town taste and conscience. The bulk of the furniture was such as might have been bought about thirty years earlier—a large oval rosewood table, heavy upholstered sofa and chairs, a large pier-glass. Superimposed on this foundation was a miscellaneous selection of objects evidently of more recent introduction, and products of that artistic development on which the latter end of the nineteenth century particularly prides itself ; there were sundry bamboo-chairs, a little oak table, a "Liberty" silk fire-screen, and so forth. And these articles were disposed about the room with an absolute absence of taste, which proclaimed that they had been selected on some other principle than that of artistic merit, and that the artistic faculty in their arranger was probably non-existent. The wall-paper was of the much-gilded floral order ; the pictures were water-colours, which startled alternately by their unprecedented feebleness and their unnecessary violence. The cottage piano more nearly resembled a nick-nack table than a musical instrument ; apparently its presence required justification.

But the incongruous ugliness of the room was not its most salient feature. It was dominated and thrown into abeyance by a certain air of solid comfort which pervaded it ; an air which obviously owed its origin—and suggested the fact with unmistakeable distinctness—to well-directed housewifely care and common sense. The comfort in question was that commonplace animal comfort which is entirely independent of beauty or refinement, needing only substantial ministration to that

physical warmth and ease which constitute it. And it spoke as eloquently in every fold of the ugly red velvet curtains, in every yard of thick, well-swept, barbaric carpet ; above all, in every matter-of-fact detail in the arrangement of the whole ; as in the strong illumination given by the large lamp and the bright fire on the spotless hearth.

But the point of the background—as of all arrangements of inanimate things—lay in the humanity for which it formed a setting, and which gave the final touch of life and reality to all its suggestions. The room had only one occupant—a woman.

She was sitting at some distance from the fire near the table, and well within the circle of lamplight, with some grey knitting in her hands ; and every line of her figure, at once composed and energetic, every decisive movement of her hands, or of her head, as she turned it now and again to look at the clock, proclaimed, beyond all possibility of doubt, that here was not only the mistress, but the mind to which the room owed its character ; the personality in which all that it shadowed forth touched the supreme expression.

She was a tall, rather large-boned woman, presumably some fifty years old, well developed and matronly-looking. She wore a brown dress, rather plainly cut after that translation of the fashion of two years back which would be likely to commend itself to a country town dress-maker, and made of a stuff which had evidently been selected with the same keen common sense as to durability, and the same absence of taste, as that evinced in the room in which she sat. It was quite unworn, and conveyed an impression of solid value and suitability ; the former characteristic being further borne out by the handsome gold brooch which fastened her collar and the watch-chain visible in the front of her

dress. She wore no cap. Her rather coarse black hair was brushed back from her forehead and arranged in a series of neat and compact plaits at the back; and, except at the temples, where it was considerably worn away, it was very plentiful.

Her face—and when once that was noticed, the hard deftness of her hands also—very subtly reduced the impression of comfort conveyed by her surroundings to an affair of line and rule, the outcome of a vigorous and rigorous sense of fitness, and a determination that things and people alike should be kept up to the mark. It had probably been conspicuously good-looking in its girlish days in a bold, highly-coloured style. The strongly-marked features and the large black eyes were still there; but under the hardening hand of time, all that had rendered them attractive had disappeared. There were few wrinkles; but two deep, perpendicular lines in the forehead and the vigorous set of the rather thin lips gave the whole face a somewhat sharp determination. The eyes, also, were keen and hard, with no beauty, either of depth or sympathy. A lack of sympathy, in fact, a something which, without being coarse in its outward expression, suggested a certain coarseness or bluntness within, was one of the most marked characteristics of the face.

She sat there, never slackening the mechanical energy of her fingers even when she glanced round, as has been said, at the clock. Even this slight manifestation of restlessness or expectancy seemed a little out of keeping with her personality. By-and-by she rose and poked the fire; strictly for its good and not at all as a satisfaction to herself. She was returning to her seat with a brisk and rather heavy step when the door opened.

"Tea, my dear? It is almost—indeed, I may say it is past five o'clock, is it not?"

The new-comer who spoke these words was a man. He was an elderly man ; his hair, indeed, was nearly white ; he was short in stature and spare in figure ; and the most remarkable point about him at the moment was the contrast between his general bearing and expression and the tone in which he spoke. His small proportions were drawn up, evidently habitually, to their fullest extent ; and there was that in the slight inflation of his chest, in the pose of his head, and in his step as he walked across the room, which revealed the fact that here was a man who was accustomed to regard himself, and, indeed, to be regarded, as a person of the utmost importance. The lines about the rather wavering pale brown eyes, innumerable fine wrinkles, spoke of perfect self-complacency. The somewhat loose lips, distinctly uncertain in expression for the moment, alone seemed to harmonize with the manner of his speech ; the shape of the chin, which might possibly have borne out the impression conveyed by the mouth, being hidden by a small white beard. His tone presented the singular combination of pomposity, peevishness, and tentativeness, the first-named qualities being conspicuously in the minority. His small and elderly tenor voice seemed to become weaker as he spoke and as he drew nearer to the fire.

He held an open letter in his hand, and as he finished speaking, he returned it to its envelope. It was addressed to "Dr. Vallotson, The Chestnuts."

"Are you thinking of waiting?" he added, submissively.

His wife glanced from the tea equipage in the corner, wanting only the tea-pot for perfect completeness, to the clock.

"She ought to be here by this time," she said. "Yes, we will wait for her."

Her voice bore out the suggestion of her face. It was hard and decisive. And Dr. Vallotson subsided into a luxurious easy chair, in which he established himself with peculiar care for his personal ease, before he spoke again. When he finally broke the silence, he appeared to be unconsciously indemnifying himself for his enforced patience by the contemplation of himself in a more dignified position.

"It has been a very expensive business," he said, fixing his eyes on the fire, and letting his finger-tips rest lightly together as he solemnly pursed up his mouth. "Very expensive, this Girton affair; and as to this foreign travelling—well, I hope Constance knows what a fortunate girl she is."

Mrs. Vallotson glanced at him for a moment with a certain half-contemptuous curve about her lips as of a listener who knows considerably more both of his expenses and his income than does the speaker himself. Then she said composedly,—

"It is a good thing for a girl to travel; and I don't suppose Girton did her any harm, either!"

There was a moment's silence, and then Dr. Vallotson fidgeted irritably. The desire for his tea was evidently growing upon him, and peremptorily demanded some kind of outlet. Being as peremptorily forbidden direct expression, it obviously sought relief through some other channel; and in a few minutes he began to speak with almost undisguised peevishness.

"I really cannot see, Adelaide," he said, "what necessity there was for sending North to meet Constance. I feel sure she could have come with perfect safety alone, or a suitable escort could have been found for her by her friends. And I have been exceedingly inconvenienced by his absence."

A moment's silence followed this expression of Dr.

Vallotson's opinion. His wife had met his little furtive movements of impatience with absolute calm. The tones of his irritable voice as he began his last speech had left her absolutely unmoved ; but during the course of that same speech her face had changed suddenly. For an instant, and only for an instant, everything about it that was hard and unwomanly was intensified until it was almost repellent. Then the tension of the muscles which must have produced this strange effect seemed to relax, leaving her face rather set.

"I do not approve of young girls travelling alone. I do not choose my daughter to do it !" she said drily and mechanically.

"But you do not seem to consider—"

Dr. Vallotson was interrupted. A very neat servant had come noiselessly into the room, and was now standing by his chair.

"If you please, sir," she said, "there's a message from the Dean's to ask when Dr. Branston will be back."

"From the Dean's !" repeated Dr. Vallotson fussily, lifting himself at the same time with evident reluctance from his easy-chair. "Say I will come down to the Deanery at once, Sarah. Dear ! dear !" In the final ejaculations were blent the accents of considerable self-importance and elation, and the regret of a naturally lazy man for ease which must be abandoned.

But as he prepared to rise the servant spoke again.

"They don't want any one at once, sir," she said. "The message is only to say will Dr. Branston step down as soon as convenient after he gets back, and to ask when—"

Quite suddenly, and almost as though the reiterated question were more than she could bear, Mrs. Vallotson interposed harshly.

"You have been told once to-day, Sarah," she said,

"Dr. Branston is expected home every moment, as you must know perfectly well ! Say that he will call at the Deanery this evening !"

There was a ring in her mistress's voice, and a flash in her mistress's eyes, before which Sarah departed precipitately. And Dr. Vallotson, apparently vaguely conscious of something in his wife's tone which seemed to him in harmony with his own feelings, turned to her with a movement full of vindictive annoyance.

"This is the kind of thing that has been going on all day," he said petulantly. "If I have been asked once in the course of this day when North will be back, I have been asked fifty times. It is exceedingly annoying."

He paused, but Mrs. Vallotson made no comment. She was knitting rapidly, with her attention apparently concentrated on her work, and her face singularly forbidding. Receiving no verbal sympathy, but not apparently feeling himself checked, Dr. Vallotson proceeded to elaborate his expression of irritation.

"That I should be anxious for his return," he said, "is natural enough. I am really beginning to feel the strain of the heavy work, which this holiday of his has thrown upon me, very severely. But it is a matter that cannot possibly affect any one else. I shall make a point of speaking to North on the subject to-morrow."

The somewhat peculiar chain of reasoning which expressed itself in the last words, spoken with much pompous irascibility, passed as unnoticed by Mrs. Vallotson as had the denunciatory tone of her husband's previous observations. As though she, in her turn, were seeking some outlet for a feeling not to be directly expressed, she lifted her eyes suddenly to the clock, and said harshly,—

"It is getting very late ! I hope North has made no mistakes about the trains."

Dr. Vallotson gave a lordly but rather unheeding wave

of his hand, as though to intimate that there was every possibility that such was the case. He pursued his own train of thought without a break.

"He has been exceedingly remiss, too, with his correspondence during his absence," he said angrily. "Exceedingly remiss! To my additional inconvenience! You remember, Adelaïde, my mentioning the new Cottage Hospital at Hatherleigh to you? They are anxious for some reason or another that North should be at its head."

"Hasn't he answered?" said Mrs. Vallotson, looking up sharply.

"Not a word!" returned her husband. "I forwarded the letter of the committee a week ago—directly after he started, you know—and he has made them no reply. I have been perfectly pestered for the last two days with inquiries as to whether I think he will undertake it. Here is a note which has just come from Archdeacon French, most anxious about it."

Mrs. Vallotson's lips took their most determined line.

"Of course he will undertake it!" she said shortly. "There's no question about it. But it is extremely wrong of him—"

She stopped short. The front-door bell was pealing through the house, and as she heard it Mrs. Vallotson rose, not hurriedly but instantly, and laid down her work. The darkness passed from her face as though the feeling that brought it there were suddenly and absolutely displaced; and she went out of the room with quick, firm steps.

Dr. Vallotson looked after her and settled himself comfortably in his chair.

"Dear child," he murmured pompously. "Dear little Constance! I wonder whether she has grown?"

A moment or two later voices and footsteps made

themselves audible in the passage outside, and he turned towards the door as it was pushed open by Mrs. Vallotson, who was saying, evidently as a conclusion to a speech unheard,—

“And you must be hungry, too, I’m sure, child! Come and have some tea directly.”

Nothing, evidently, could make Mrs. Vallotson’s voice soft, or her face tender; but there was something about her alert decision as she re-entered the room—a satisfaction, a kind of pleased excitement—which changed her very strangely. She did not touch the girl who was following her, nor did she glance round at her as she hastened across the room to the tea-table. But in every line of her face, in every tone of her voice, as she issued quick, terse orders to the servant who was bringing in the tea-pot, there was an intense consciousness of her presence.

The new arrival was a small, thin girl with Mrs. Vallotson’s large black eyes; a smooth forehead surmounted, under her travelling hat, by soft, fluffy brown hair; a little nose rather inclined to turn up at the tip; and a brown complexion. She would have been a very pretty girl but for the excessive prominence of a chin that seemed too large for her face. She was a little pale now, as though with fatigue; but her expression and bearing were singularly composed, and singularly self-assured.

She received the embrace with which Dr. Vallotson greeted her with great calmness, kissing him lightly on the cheek in return.

“Thanks, yes, a very good journey on the whole!” she said, in answer to his inquiry. “Oh, no, I’m not tired, thank you, father. The distance from Paris is nothing, you know.”

The high-pitched girlish voice was a little self-satisfied,

and more than a little supercilious. It harmonized unmistakably with the curve, evidently habitual, of the rather pretty lips, and with the glance of the eyes. But the expression and the manner alike modified—with curious unconsciousness of the fact on the part of their owner—as Mrs. Vallotson spoke from the other side of the room, and the girl turned towards her.

"Here's your tea, Connie," said Mrs. Vallotson. "Take it and sit down there by the fire. That's right! Are you cold? How is it you're so late?"

"What time did you leave London?" added Dr. Vallotson, condescendingly.

"The train was late, mother," returned the girl, with much less self-assertion in her voice—though here again the modification was evidently quite unconscious. "Nearly half an hour late. Dear me, it is nice to be at home again!"

She was looking at her mother, as she spoke, with a little smile in her eyes which made her face far prettier than did their ordinary critical expression. But Mrs. Vallotson only replied by a brief nod of approbation, though the lines about her mouth were wonderfully relaxed as she turned her attention to the condition of the tea-pot. It was Dr. Vallotson who said,—

"Of course! of course! Quite right, my dear, quite right! Let me see, now; how long is it since you were at home? Six months?"

"Ten months," said his wife decisively. "Connie didn't leave Cambridge at Easter, and she went abroad directly the summer holidays began. I think you've grown, Connie."

Connie drew herself up with some dignity.

"I don't think so, mother!" she said rather quickly. "One doesn't generally grow at my age, does one? North said—"

Mrs. Vallotson turned towards her abruptly, a quick contraction as of sudden recollection making the lines in her forehead show deep and clear cut. But the verbal interruption came from her husband.

"North!" he said testily. "Yes, by-the-bye, of course! Where is North?"

"He has come, I suppose?" said Mrs. Vallotson. Her voice rang in harsh contrast with the tone of her last observation, and Constance answered her mother.

"Oh, yes," she said indifferently, "of course. A man met him at the station—one of the men out of Garrett's stores, I think he said—and asked him to go and see his son as soon as he could; and North went with him at once. He asked me to say that he should not be long."

Mrs. Vallotson made no comment. She poured out a second cup of tea for her husband, with no softening of the contraction of her brows. But Dr. Vallotson amply compensated Connie for her silence.

"A most preposterous thing to do!" he declared. "Most preposterous! and really almost insulting in North, as though the practice needed his services so urgently that he could not even go through the town without finding work! The practice has done very well without him, as I can assure him, though I have been worked to death! He should most certainly have come home first, and received his instructions from me. A man from Garrett's stores, did you say?" Dr. Vallotson's cheeks flushed a faint, angry pink as he spoke. "Why, that must be the person who sent for me late last night—all down to Hobart's Court—and evidently a slight case! Of course, I did not think of going. I sent the man on to Smith. If North had had the common courtesy to consult me on the subject, I could have told him so!"

Mrs. Vallotson's eyes were turned upon her husband

as he spoke, and their gaze seemed somewhat to discompose him, though she did not speak. He was beating his foot upon the carpet with an uneasy assertion of righteously offended dignity, when Constance, who had been contemplating him with some disapprobation in her eyes, turned her head suddenly.

"Wasn't that the front door?" she said. "I expect that is North."

With a movement that was very sudden and almost violent, Mrs. Vallotson rose, and turned away to place her knitting in a basket on a side-table. As will sometimes happen in moments of even trivial expectancy, no one spoke. Dr. Vallotson continued to beat his foot upon the carpet with a pronounced accentuation of his air of lofty indignation. Constance drank her tea in composed indifference. And it was in the midst of the same silence that Mrs. Vallotson, with her lips so tightly set as to be even slightly paled, came back into the lamp-light as the door opened, and a tall, dark young man came into the room. He paused for an instant on the threshold as he became aware of the family group awaiting him, and a constraint which might have been a faint reflection of the rigidity in the dark woman's face turned towards him, seemed to strengthen about him. Then he crossed the room to Mrs. Vallotson.

"How are you, Adelaide?" he said, in a strong and full, but rather formal, tone. "I am sorry to have been delayed."

And then, as she mechanically lifted her check to him, he stooped and just touched it with his lips.

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CHAPTER II.

THE little cathedral city of Alnchester, lying snugly ensconced beneath its long range of sheltering, if insignificant hills, seemed to have missed, in spite of its antiquity, that vaguely attractive quality called venerableness. The few old houses left had little character of their own, and no beauty. Even the cathedral was an uninteresting grey pile. The market-place and all the older part of the town lay directly at the bottom of the hills and near the river. The newer parts had grown up on the other side of the market-place, and had spread up a steep rise in the ground ; and it was from these newer parts that the town derived such negative colour as it possessed. To the commonplace was wedded an air of unimpeachable respectability ; neat, well kept, monotonous.

Whether the character of their city influenced the tone of the inhabitants, or whether the tone of the inhabitants was responsible for the character of the city, it is not possible to say. The fact remains that the people of Alnchester were in perfect harmony with their surroundings.

The ideas of Alnchester were bounded by Alnchester thought. Messages from the world beyond, in the shape of books or newspapers, were received on approval, so to speak ; but unless the matter they contained was susceptible of transmutation by the Alnchester mind into something that the Alnchester public could understand

and accept, they were loftily ignored, or still more loftily condemned. The wheels of daily life ran in grooves which time had modified, inevitably, to some extent, but which had been modified as inevitably to the Alnchester pattern. Innovations of all kinds were regarded with a disapproving superiority, which only melted into approval and admiration when the progress of time and the touch of necessity had made them apparently indigenous to Alnchester soil.

The society of Alnchester was divided sharply into two divisions : the cathedral people and the townspeople. The two parties never mixed—the thing would have seemed to them inconceivable—but they existed side by side in perfect amity. The cathedral people, the aristocrats of Alnchester, looked down with serene tolerance upon their inferiors. The townspeople were not without a certain pride in the precincts, and were never weary of striving for the impossible—a footing in the “cathedral set.” Each sphere had its own interests complete within itself ; its own topics of gossip. But either sphere being somewhat limited as a field for human energies, and Alnchester affairs being of course better worth attention than any other, it did happen now and again that a conspicuous event in one sphere would attract the notice of the other, and serve as food for discussion in both.

Such an event had taken place, towards the end of the 'sixties, in the establishment in Alnchester of a new doctor. The circumstance had not at first sight seemed one likely to focus the attention of town and precincts for any length of time. The practice which death had rendered vacant was not an important one. But the transitory interest which was all that his fellow-townsmen had been prepared to bestow upon the new-comer had found itself, almost without consciousness, certainly with-

out volition, on their part, arrested and held. The new doctor turned out to be a newly-married man. Before very long it began to be whispered about that young Mrs. Vallotson was "rather an acquisition ; so capable, and so sensible." And at the same time Dr. Vallotson, who was understood to be ten years her senior, and who was referred to at first in somewhat non-committal terms as "a nice, quiet little man," was discovered to be "very clever in his profession." The practice began to grow.

There was a certain feature about the Vallotson household which afforded unlimited material for discussion in Alnchester ; and thus helped, other circumstances being so favourable, to keep it before the public eye. And this was the presence therein of a dark, taciturn little boy of four years old. He was introduced to Alnchester as Mrs. Vallotson's half-brother, by name North Branston.

So great a disparity of age between a half-brother and sister, argued a family history of some interest ; it also suggested the pleasing probability of exceedingly charming relations of a semi-maternal character between the said brother and sister. As to the first of these two points, Alnchester was enlightened on its introduction to the boy in a few matter-of-fact sentences, which accounted for his existence in the simplest fashion, and deprived it of any possible halo of romance. On the second point, also, Alnchester was doomed to a partial disappointment. As far as his material well-being was concerned, no son of the house could have been better cared for than was little North Branston. But everyone who saw the woman and the child together was struck, not only by the total absence of any picturesque sentiment in their relations to one another, but by the presence of something which Alnchester found hard to define. No sign of mutual tenderness or sympathy evinced itself, even to the most un-
synx-eyed observer. The woman was always cold and

hard ; the child was always silent and reserved. A chill and inexplicable barrier seemed to separate these two who were so closely and peculiarly bound together. The fact, but for the scrupulous care which the child received, would have weighed rather heavily against Mrs. Vallotson in the balance of public favour. In consideration, however, of this care, so unremitting and so untender, sundry sentimental ladies decided that there must be "something" in connection with the death of his parents that had alienated Mrs. Vallotson's affection, and a few judicious questions were put to her husband on the subject. Dr. Vallotson was perfectly willing to answer any questions at any length, provided that he was physically at ease during the process. He was more than willing to detail the circumstances under which he had met his wife, a daily governess in London, making a home for the child by her exertions. But his further information, when sifted, amounted to nothing more or less than the bare statements which had been made in the first instance by his wife.

In the meantime, however, the practice continued to grow, and Dr. and Mrs. Vallotson's popularity and usefulness grew likewise. North Branston, on the other hand, grew upon no one. He was sullen, people said ; or stupid, or ill-tempered. Alnchester gradually ceased to find anything singular in Mrs. Vallotson's want of affection for him ; began to pity her in that fate had burdened her with the care of him ; and to admire the precision with which she did her duty by him.

At six years old the boy was sent to a boarding school. Mrs. Vallotson was the object of much interest to the female section of society at the time, and though only two years had passed since the household was first established at Alnchester, there was no one found to say or think that he was but a little fellow to leave home. It

was well known by this time that he was absolutely dependent upon Dr. Vallotson's bounty ; and the popular sentiment was one of admiration at the thoroughly first-class, and consequently expensive, nature of the school selected. It was so good of Dr. Vallotson, everybody said ; and when a few months later a little girl was added to the Vallotson household, everybody amplified this appreciative dictum. It was particularly good of him now that he had a family of his own, Alnchester said.

From that time onward, for over twenty years, that note of admiration for the way in which "young Branston" was treated remained a fundamental note in the chord of popular opinion as to the Vallotsons. It was understood that the boy was to be educated for the medical profession ; he was put steadily through all the most approved stages of such a course. And during the years they occupied, Alnchester knew him only in his vacations. Under these circumstances he soon ceased to be an object of any personal interest. Constance Vallotson, who remained Dr. and Mrs. Vallotson's only child, belonged by birth to Alnchester ; she grew up to that place which her parents had gradually acquired in the town ; and was the familiar object of the interest and regard of her fellow citizens. North Branston, on his occasional appearances, was considered solely as a member of the Vallotson household. In this capacity he was criticized, commented upon, and found distinctly wanting. It was an accepted fact that he remained an inharmonious element. And in the lively sense of the difficult temper which was thence imputed to him, the fact, rather vaguely realized in Alnchester, that he was passing through his school and college career with distinction, was relegated to the remotest background.

There was one feature of the attitude of Alnchester, where North Branston was concerned, which was very

significant of the attitude of Alnchester to the Vallotsons in every relation of life. It came about as time passed, that when the subject was discussed, the wife's name supplanted the husband's. People began to talk of Mrs. Vallotson's goodness and generosity rather than the doctor's. And it was Mrs. Vallotson's name which was more often in the public mouth in every connection. As the years rolled on, and the vigorous young wife who had come to the town developed into a vigorous middle-aged woman, there were those who alluded to Mrs. Vallotson as "managing" or "masterful," and even hinted that her husband had neither opinions nor will of his own. But before such sentiments formulated themselves, the Vallotsons' position had become unassailable. By the time North Branston's medical course was finished, Dr. Vallotson was one of the two leading doctors in Alnchester. When North Branston, having taken his degree, returned to the town to become Dr. Vallotson's partner, Alnchester sagely wagged its head and hoped that he properly appreciated his good fortune ; hoped, further, that he might improve upon acquaintance, and justify his acceptance for the sake of his connections.

Since then four years had passed. Four years during which the only event in the Vallotson household patent to the Alnchester eye had been Constance Vallotson's three years' sojourn at Girton—an event which was considered rather electrifying alike in town and precincts—and her subsequent departure for a four months' stay with some friends who were travelling at their leisure on the Continent. It was on the termination of these travels at Berlin that North Branston had been commissioned to bring her home ; and it was the journey thence which had ended in Alnchester on that misty October afternoon.

CHAPTER III.

It was about nine o'clock in the evening, three days after North Branston and Constance Vallotson had reached home, and the Vallotsons' home was very quiet. There was a little room at the back on the ground floor, which was known to the servants as "Dr. Branston's room." It was not a cheerful-looking room at any time ; its bare appointments suggested an absence of interest in its owner in anything but the actual necessities of his life ; and in the gloomy half-light cast by the concentrated rays of the green-shaded reading-lamp on the writing-table it was particularly cheerless. Seated at the writing-table, writing intently in a well-worn case book, was North Branston.

Long ago, when the tide of public favour first set against him in Alnchester, it had been one of the indictments against North Branston that he was "such a very ugly little boy" ; and it was generally held that he had fulfilled the promise of his boyhood by becoming a "most unattractive-looking man." Except in a general darkness of colouring, he bore no resemblance to Mrs. Vallotson. His features were irregular, the outline of his chin and jaw being very finely cut, if somewhat square, while his nose was distinctly too broad. His eyes—very deeply set—were grey ; cynical, sarcastic eyes, they were, with a keen glance. He had a good square forehead, too much and too deeply lined for his years. He wore a short moustache, dark, like his hair,

which did not hide the fact that his mouth was large, delicately cut, and very firm ; or that its resolution was of a contemptuous order. The whole face was full of power, but it was power at its hardest and most unlovely, quite untouched by human sympathy.

And yet, as he sat there, his forehead propped on his clenched hand, forcing himself, as every tense line of his figure showed, to omit no iota of the work in hand, there was that about him which gave a strange and inconsistent touch of pathos to his solitary figure. He was evidently desperately tired. His eyes were sunken even beyond their wont, and there were dark shadows about them. For the last three days a press of work—which did not extend to Dr. Vallotson, and which that gentleman characterized testily as “quite extraordinary”—had deprived Dr. Branston of proper food and proper rest. He had only come in half an hour ago to take a hasty and solitary meal, and he had set to work immediately to enter his notes for the day.

He worked steadily for twenty minutes, blotted the page, and placed the book in a drawer. Then he seemed to let all his strained muscles relax. He leaned back in his chair, one hand resting nerveless on the blotting-pad before him, and gazed straight into space with eyes which spoke of nothing but the consciousness of exhaustion.

A quarter of an hour passed, and still he did not move. But as though he were too strong a man, in body as well as in mind, to be long dominated by fatigue, his expression gradually changed. Thought gradually came back to it ; incisive, keenly personal thought. Determination came back to it, cold, and clear-cut. At last he rose, with the braced and intent expression of a man who feels that work has only been cleared out of the way to make the field clear for yet other and pre-

eminently important work. He crossed the room to the door and went down the passage to the drawing-room. The drawing-room door was shut. He opened it and went in.

Mrs. Vallotson was sitting there alone. In the afternoon Dr. Vallotson had given forth his intention of helping North through his press of work by driving into the country—it was a lovely autumn day—to visit a patient who suffered from old age, and who had to be seen occasionally. The relations of the said patient were old friends of the Vallotsons, rich people, with a large country house; and Dr. Vallotson's professional calls always, and as an understood thing, extended into a friendly visit. On this occasion he had taken Constance with him, and the father and daughter were not to be expected back for another half-hour at least. Of these facts North was of course aware.

Mrs. Vallotson looked up sharply as the door opened, and her brows contracted.

"Have you had supper?" she said tersely.

He bent his head with a slight affirmative gesture, shut the door deliberately behind him, and came across the room to the fireplace. He did not sit down. He leaned one elbow on the mantelpiece and faced Mrs. Vallotson.

"Adelaide," he said, "I want to speak to you."

His voice was rather deep, and a cold reserved tone was habitual to it. But it seemed to be even unusually distinct and full of purpose now, and there was a harder ring about it than was customary.

Mrs. Vallotson, who had turned her attention to her knitting, still with that contraction of her brows, looked up again suddenly. She looked at him for a moment, the shadowy antagonism which had dawned in her face as he entered the room growing swiftly. Then she said harshly;—

"Well? What is it?"

North Branston was not looking at her, though he faced her. With the instant that brought him into her presence all the most disagreeable characteristics of his face had become accentuated in a very marked degree, and the eyes which he fixed on the basket at her hand were less prepossessing than ever.

"I don't want to put the thing more unpleasantly than is necessary," he said, in the same incisive tones. "You'll recollect, no doubt, without my going into details, that when I came here to enter into partnership with Dr. Vallotson I did so against my own convictions."

A curious flash passed across Mrs. Vallotson's face; a flash which was at once a realization of a suddenly and totally unlooked-for call to battle, and an instantaneous acceptance of the call. Her thin lips took an ugly line.

"You can use any fine words you like about it, of course!" she said. "I remember that you came against your own wishes."

The gesture with which he answered was one of sardonically indifferent acquiescence.

"Very well," he said, "as you like! I was a young fellow then, and I was fool enough to have ambition. I was fool enough, too, I dare say, to believe the men who said I might do something if I stopped in London. One grows out of that kind of thing, however, and I've got through the process. But, putting my private fancies out of the question, perhaps you remember that I said that the thing would never work? That is four years ago. It has had a fair trial, and the time has come to acknowledge all round that it has not worked."

"Who says so?"

Mrs. Vallotson had laid down her knitting and was sitting very erect, her face a little lifted.

"I say so ! All Alnchester would say so !"—this with a contemptuous inflection. Dr. Vallotson would say so if he chose to take the trouble ! You would say so, Adelaide, if you chose to speak the truth."

With a sudden violent gesture Mrs. Vallotson broke into an angry exclamation, but North interposed. He did not raise his voice ; his gesture was the slightest possible movement ; but it was a curious fact that the wrathful, determined woman obeyed it and let him continue.

"I don't want to go into details," he said. "We shall get at nothing by a quarrel. What I have to say is this. I have been offered an appointment in London—a very decent appointment, though that is beside the mark—and I propose to accept it."

"You will not accept it."

"Why not ?"

Short, fierce, ringing with determination on either side, the two speeches had followed instantly one upon the other. North had turned his eyes at last, and the man and woman were looking full into one another's faces ; each so strong, each as sharply contrasted in the nature of their strength as they were sharply opposed in their set resolution. There was a moment's silence, and then Mrs. Vallotson spoke. It was a significant and noticeable fact that as her passion flamed suddenly into play, that suggestion of something coarse-grained in her nature, which was hardly perceptible about her usually, except by inference, stepped out of ambush, as it were, and revealed itself in every line of her face. She spoke slowly, but her emphatic voice had lost all refinement of modulation.

"Why not ?" she said. "If you're not ashamed to hear, I'll tell you. Because you are under obligations which you can't throw off so easily ! Because you were

educated for nearly twenty years at Dr. Vallotson's expense ; you were dependent upon him for everything. And such return as lies in your power you are bound to make him."

A dull, red flush had mounted to North's forehead, and the muscles round his mouth stood out with unnatural distinctness. But his eyes never wavered. He bent his head.

"Quite true," he said, and his low voice grated slightly. "I am not likely to forget. But what return do I make him by remaining here ? The money part of the business has been balanced between us, I should say, in the course of the last four years. You don't allude to that, I suppose ? And you can hardly assert that my personal presence is any satisfaction to Dr. Vallotson. Let him take a partner in the regular way, a good, commonplace all-round man—the practice can well afford it—and he will be far better pleased than he is at present."

There was the suggestion of a sneer in his voice, but the doctor's wife took no heed of it.

"I don't know that your personal presence is ever likely to be much satisfaction to any one," she said, biting. "You don't go the way to make it so, at any rate. But that is not the point. Dr. Vallotson is not so young as he was. You are looked to to help him, and no stranger could take your place. It is your duty to stay."

"I don't agree with you," was the grim response. "And I am going to take the liberty of acting on my own lights on the subject. The present state of things is not such a pleasant one, as it seems to me, that you need be annoyed at its breaking up !"

Mrs. Vallotson laid her hand heavily on the table.

"Once and for all, North," she said, "it shall not be ! You have been brought up to fill your present position. That you fill it ill is your fault. Fill it you shall."

Quite suddenly the cold reserve in which North Brantston seemed to have encased himself gave way ; his very lips lost their colour ; his eyes flashed. He took up her words in a voice which thrilled and broke with something desperate and appealing.

"Why?" he cried. "For heaven's sake, Adelaide, why? What am I in this house but a nuisance, an outsider? What have I been to you for as long as I can remember but a thorn in the flesh? To Dr. Vallotson my presence is a continual rub; everything I do, and say, and am, chafes and annoys him; he has disliked me, and resented my existence—no blame to him for it—ever since I was a child. And for yourself, Adelaide—look at the truth if it's only for a moment! Heaven knows I don't forget what I owe to you! It's to you I owe everything—not to Vallotson—I know that. You and I stood alone in the world together when I was a little chap, and you kept the life in me—I don't forget. But when has there been any love between us? Heaven knows why it should be so, but we are opposed to one another in every fibre. Why do you keep us together?"

With every vehement word—as though the feeling which was finding vent at last gathered strength with each instant of long delayed expression—his excitement had grown; and he stood now confronting her, his eyes glowing, his white face working. But if the strong emotion on his face was strange to it, the face of the woman who listened to him had changed no less.

As though his words, sweeping away all that was superficial about the question at issue, and striking to the root of the matter, had swept away also all that was superficial and temporary about her anger and resolution, all the fierce and alert determination of her face was gone. She had risen to her feet slowly. Her eyes revealed depths only in that moment suggested; and from those

depths welled up hard and unmistakable that which Alnchester had faintly felt between the pair when the man who met it now had been a little child ; that which, as it stood forth unveiled and terrible, revealed itself as lurking always behind the cold antagonism of their mature relation ; repulsion—repulsion ineradicable, an instinct of the woman's very nature ; repulsion only the more terrible for the slow, still horror with which it was mingled. Gradually the passion of appeal which glowed in North's eyes faded, to be as gradually replaced by a ghastly reflection of the look in the woman's eyes which met them. Then with a groan he let his face fall on his arm as he rested it upon the mantelpiece.

Mrs. Vallotson did not move. Gradually the lines into which her face was set began to relax. Something of the woman of every day began to reassert itself upon her features. Her eyes seemed to become more alive. At last she spoke. Her voice was rather thin and strained, but its inflections were those habitual to her.

"You are a fool, North !" she said harshly. "It's of no use to talk heroics. If you think a moment you'll see that my reason for wishing you to stay is perfectly plain and simple, and has nothing to do with sentiment of any kind. That's not my way. Dr. Vallotson and a stranger would never get on together—you know that as well as I do. If he had a partner who was good for anything the practice would drift into the partner's hands before a year was out. If he was not good for anything it would drift somewhere else. That's all. You don't want me to amplify, I suppose ? "

There was a pause. Mrs. Vallotson stood erect, one hand resting heavily on the table, her eyes fixed upon the motionless figure before her. At last North Branston moved. He lifted his head slowly, and stood, gripping the edge of the mantelpiece, gazing down to the fire.

As though his movement had been some kind of answer to her words, Mrs. Vallotson continued, speaking in a voice that was stronger and more assured.

"You must do as you choose, of course. I can't keep you here by force. If you go it's for your own advantage, I suppose, and it's no use for you to make speeches about not caring and having no ambition. You don't deceive even yourself, I imagine! You can do it, as I say, but understand that you are wanted here, and if you go away you turn your back upon the people who have done everything for you; you turn your back upon your obligations. You can do it, if you care to, but don't say you're doing anything different!"

She stopped; the determined face was turned upon him, lynx-eyed; and North moved again and lifted his eyes, not turning to her, but looking straight before him. The singular and unusual excitement by which he had been so suddenly caught and shaken had died out of his face; the reaction which had followed had evidently penetrated him through and through. His features, on which the traces of physical exhaustion were once more distinctly visible, were set into a cynicism and a depth of self-contempt which was almost apathetic.

"I don't care to!" he said. His voice was low, toneless, and almost expressionless. "I don't care one way or the other! Why should I? As you like, Adelaide!"

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CHAPTER IV.

CONSTANCE VALLOTSON stood in the middle of a little room which had once been her school-room. She had been at home, now, four days, and she had devoted the morning of the present day to the completion of the arrangement of her possessions in what was to be for the future her own room. The room had been done up for her reception with a conspicuously cheerful-looking paint and paper. The girl's eyes rested on the furniture which had come from her room at Girton, and which was of the severest artistic-collegiate type ; they rested on the pictures on the walls, also her private property, and consisting for the most part of grim reproductions of old German pictures of the most awe-inspiring nature. Thence they wandered to the background afforded by the paint and paper, and an air of grave disapproval expressed itself in every loftily critical line of her face as she shook her head sadly.

At that moment a clock struck the half-hour. It was half-past three, and Constance started. She went across to a second door in the room which led into a bedroom, and began to make rapid preparations for going out. The clothes she took from her wardrobe were smart and pretty ; and, though she dressed herself very quickly, she put on her things with a certain care and deftness which were doubtless, arguing from the expression of her face, mere concessions to the weakness of society. She had just fastened her hat at a particularly becoming angle

when she heard the door of the outer room open ; and, catching up her gloves and muff, she went quickly out.

"I hope I'm not late, mother !" she said. "I haven't kept you, have I? Have you come to look at my room?" she added dubiously. "How do you like it?"

Her mother had paused just within the doorway, and was looking about her with an air of tolerant neutrality. She brought her survey to a close with the girlish figure opposite her, and the neutrality faded into something which was very like indulgence.

"I've no doubt it's beautiful, child," she said tersely. "Anyhow, you can have your own way up here, as I told you. It's a nice bright paper!"

Mrs. Vallotson was very handsomely dressed for walking, in a solidly dignified style which did not rely for its effect on any adherence to the fashion of the moment ; there was a presence and a stir about her which obviously arose from a sense of importance. There was to be a drawing-room meeting that afternoon in connection with one of the two or three non-local philanthropic enterprises which Alnchester honoured with its approbation and support. The particular enterprise in question was conspicuously popular in Alnchester, and Mrs. Vallotson was one of its principal promoters—the local secretary, indeed—so that her position at the forthcoming meeting would necessarily be a prominent one. Moreover, the function, which took place only once a year, was by no means limited to its business character. Business being disposed of, it became one of the chief social gatherings of the Alnchester year ; just the occasion, in fact, on which to re-introduce a young woman to her fellow townspeople ; Mrs. Vallotson looked her daughter over, now, from head to foot with critically approving eyes.

"You look very well, Connie!" she said shortly.

"Where did you get that hat and jacket? In London? They are very nice! Come, we shall be late if we wait any longer."

Their destination lay at no great distance from their own house, and it was rather as a tribute to the ceremonial nature of the occasion than from any necessity of the case that they went thither in Dr. Vallotson's brougham. It was a large house standing in a considerable garden. Its owner was a native of Alnchester, who had made a large fortune by means which his fellow citizens seldom specified, connected with trade; and who had retired after a hard-working and successful career, to occupy his prosperous leisure, and that of his comfortable and kind-hearted wife, with benevolence and good works, both public and private.

It was about ten minutes to four—four o'clock being the hour named for the meeting—when Mrs. Vallotson and Constance entered the drawing-room; the room was filled as closely as possible with rows of chairs, by far the greater number of which were already occupied, considerably more than half these occupants being ladies. At the extreme end of the room, facing this audience, was placed a small table, behind which sat a tall, nervous-looking man—the deputation from the parent society, for whose fitting reception the assembly was convened. Grouped about this table, and also facing the room, were other chairs, evidently intended for a select few. Only three or four of these were as yet occupied; and the air of dignified reserve of those who sat in them, together with the singularly conservative nature of their garments, proclaimed them to be of the precincts.

As Mrs. Vallotson, tall, commanding, and with the air of a woman who is well aware of her own value and of the effect she is likely to produce, advanced into the room, followed by her daughter, there was an instant's

partial hush in the buzz of conversation ; which rose again into a very clatter of tongues as though the brief pause were something to be concealed, as the mistress of the house hastened to receive the new-comer.

"Here you are, dear Mrs. Vallotson!" she said, in a comfortable but rather agitated voice. "So very glad! Not that it's late—oh, no, of course not! Only one is always glad when you have arrived. You have such a head, you know. And Connie, too! Dear me, my love, this is very pleasant! I heard you had come home!"

"It will be a good meeting!" said Mrs. Vallotson decidedly, as she glanced about the room. "Connie, you had better go and sit there by Mrs. Norton—look, she is nodding to you. Go along!"

And as her daughter obeyed her, Mrs. Vallotson turned and followed her hostess up to the table.

"Very well she looks, to be sure!" said worthy Mrs. Grey. "And sweetly pretty, too! You must be glad to have her back, I know! Ah! Mr. Kennedy"—this to the deputation as they reached the end of the room—"let me have the pleasure of presenting you to Mrs. Vallotson, our secretary—our moving spirit, I may say!"

The Vallotsons belonged to the town; the magic line which separated the town from the precincts had never been crossed by them; on neutral ground only was there any communion. But if it had been otherwise, Mrs. Vallotson could hardly have experienced the vigorous satisfaction which pervaded her face at that moment as she took her place among the cathedral people at the table, before the whole town, as it were, by right of the prominence of her position.

To judge of the proceedings that followed—when a continuous stream of arrivals had packed the room, and

when the select circle of chairs about the table had received sufficiently eminent occupants—from the face which Constance Vallotson turned upon them, would have been to conclude that they represented the mole-like efforts of a race of beings absolutely different in kind from the girlish personality which was regarding them with impartial eyes. Except when her mother made a brief and decisive statement of a business character, when her critical air melted into respect, Constance sat through the meeting with a little wrinkle in her forehead which was as supercilious in its way as was the set of her lips. And it was with a sigh of unmistakable relief that she rose in the general movement that ensued on the termination of the proceedings, and looked about her.

Her attention was instantly claimed in every direction. The position occupied in the place by her father and mother could hardly have been more clearly demonstrated than by the fact that almost everyone within reach was anxious to shake hands with her, while many people in different parts of the room were nodding friendly greetings. Constance was responding to the demands thus made upon her with calm self-assurance and self-possession, when a look and gesture from her mother, who was still standing at the upper end of the room responding to greetings and answering questions referred to her on all sides, summoned her to her side. She had obeyed the summons and had drifted with all the aristocracy of Alnchester into the tea-room, when a quick, rather boyish voice behind her said,—

“I say, you’ve not forgotten me, have you, Constance?”

Constance was practically alone for the moment. She turned quickly. By her side, with eagerly outstretched hand, stood a slight, fair young man, with a pleasant

face and a jovial twinkle in his blue eyes ; and, as she saw him, a flash of genuine girlish pleasure displaced for an instant the superior indifference on Constance's face.

"Bryan !" she exclaimed. "I didn't know you were here. How do you do ? "

"I've had my eye on you for ever so long," he returned cheerily. "Somebody told me you had come home, and I hoped you were sure to be here this afternoon. I'm afraid you've been rather bored, haven't you ? "

His eyes were fixed upon her face, to which its normal expression had now returned, with a humorous twinkle in them which did not prevent their being slightly disturbed.

Constance responded with a condescending gesture at once of negation and scorn.

"I'm never bored," she said loftily. "I consider it weak-minded. But it has certainly been rather an exhibition. I should have thought that a man who was not obliged to come might have found something better to do with his time."

She was looking at him as she spoke with a severe expression on her features, but apparently the young man was somewhat impervious to severity, for he laughed.

"Oh, as to that," he said, "it's a good object, poor little beggars." (The society had to do with the rescue of destitute children.) "And as to an exhibition—well, isn't that coming it rather strong, Connie ? "

The movement of the crowd had pushed them away from the centre of the room where they had met, and they had drifted until they now found themselves at the end of the room. He leaned back against the wall, crossing his legs and turning his face towards her with a certain dubious surprise dawning in them, and she returned his look with a critical glance strongly tinged with a lofty pity.

The familiarity with which they had met was founded

on an intimate acquaintance which was as old as the consciousness of either. Bryan Armitage was the son of people who had been Dr. and Mrs. Vallotson's next door neighbours for twenty years ; and the intimacy between the families had been of that close nature which is the alternative in such cases to a dignified aloofness on either side, or war to the knife. Bryan was an only child. He had not been sent away from home until he was fourteen ; by which time the strongest alliance, founded on much quarrelling, much frank speaking, and much mutual dependence for amusement, existed between the boy and his girl neighbour. The alliance had withstood the trial of absence, and renewed itself with every holiday time. Bryan did not go to college. At eighteen he went into a large bank, one of the features of Alnchester, the senior partner in which was a connection of his mother's. And when, a year later, both his parents died, the young man remained where circumstances had placed him, exchanging his home for lodgings in the town.

Constance answered him now without an instant's pause. Her opinions were evidently of the most distinct and uncompromising order.

"It depends upon how you see it !" she said, with decision. "It was an exhibition to me. Look at the way in which the business was done ! No woman of the last generation understands business, and it's really pitiful to see them undertake it."

Bryan Armitage wrinkled up his forehead.

"I say ! Pile it up !" he ejaculated audaciously. "What about Mrs. Vallotson, then, Constance ? She's the exception that proves the rule, I suppose."

Connie's cheeks were just a little flushed, and her chin was elevated at a stately angle. She was not accustomed, evidently, to have her remarks received with laughter.

"My mother is a very exceptional woman," she said, with much majesty. "She is not to be classed with the ordinary women of her generation."

She paused a moment that the process of annihilation might complete itself, and then continued in a tone of condescending regret,—

"But even mother, you see, is not quite exempt from the narrow prejudices which characterize the women of the past, or she couldn't possibly give her mind to such trivialities as a society like this."

"What society, now, would you recommend as a sphere for a really large-minded and unprejudiced woman?"

Bryan Armitage's tone was gravity itself, and there was not the faintest vestige of a smile about his usually jovial face. Only in his eyes there was a suspicious twinkle. Constance did not see the twinkle; his tone was perfectly natural and satisfactory to her.

She sighed heavily.

"That is quite one of the questions of the day," she said solemnly. "And really it is rather difficult to answer it on any abstract lines. But, of course, with reference to Alnchester, it's easy enough; there is nothing! That is what finally determined me to come home."

He regarded her for a moment with an unmoved countenance, but still with that twinkle in his eyes. And then he said seriously,—

"I'm afraid I'm very stupid—having lived in Alnchester all my life, of course I should be. But surely such a grave deficiency in the place would be rather a reason for deciding to go—somewhere else? It makes it just the last place in the world for you!"

She smiled graciously.

"Well, of course it is very nice of you to feel that," she said, "and it would be ridiculous of me to pretend that it is not true. But you see, superior women as a

rule have too strong a tendency to attach themselves to spheres where the ground is already broken—where the work is obvious. Consequently I have determined to make an exception. I am going to create a sphere for myself. I am going to show what may be effected by one woman in a place like Alnchester."

The statement, uttered in a tone of lofty self-abnegation, and coming as it did from so small and so distinctly child-like a figure, was too much for Bryan Armitage's self-control. The future creator of a "sphere" was gazing majestically—metaphorically speaking, since nature's niggardliness in the matter of inches did not allow of her actual performance of the feat—over the heads of the inferior crowd to be thus benignly influenced, when she was startled back to the present by a most unseemly sound at her very elbow. Bryan Armitage was choking with suppressed laughter. She turned upon him, he caught her eye, and his laughter was suppressed no longer.

"I'm awfully sorry, Connie!" he gasped in another instant. "I say, I beg your pardon most tremendously. But it's so awfully funny to hear you talk like that! It's something so new! Look here," he added quickly and earnestly, "don't be angry with me, I'm so sorry!"

But Connie's dignity was not to be wounded with impunity. She faced for him a moment in speechless indignation, the little brown face scarlet, and her eyes flashing with a passion which seemed a trifle inconsistent with her usual superior calm.

"I consider you beneath contempt," she said briefly. And therewith she moved forward into the crowd, erect as a dart, and left him.

Half an hour later Constance, still with a slightly flushed face and with her chin somewhat aggressively raised, was walking down the drive away from the house at her mother's side. She had not deigned to bestow

another word upon Bryan Armitage, though he had presented himself, protected by her mother's presence, to take leave. And it was evident that society at large was expiating his offence under the ban of her lofty disapproval.

But whatever annoyance the afternoon had brought to Constance, to her mother it had evidently been fraught with unalloyed content. All the characteristics which had marked Mrs. Vallotson's demeanour in Constance's room earlier in the afternoon—the assurance, the sense of importance, the anticipation of success—were accentuated, now that the afternoon lay behind her, tenfold; accentuated into an almost unreasoning and all-permeating dominance which is only possible, perhaps, when the mind contains some private source of satisfaction by which all external triumphs, as they blend with it, are enhanced, and through which in some mysterious way they become more keenly pleasing.

The seven o'clock dinner, which was a tradition in the Vallotson household, was not usually a conspicuously cheerful meal. To-night, however, Mrs. Vallotson came into the dining-room, where her husband and daughter, only, were waiting for her, with that glow of triumph still upon her face, and glanced towards the empty place which should have been filled by North Branston without that contraction of the brows which the sight usually evoked.

"A very good meeting!" she declared in answer to Dr. Vallotson's question, at once fussily and tentatively put. "Better than last year's, even. You ought to have been there, Robert. You would have enjoyed it!"

Dr. Vallotson waved his hand pompously.

"No doubt! no doubt!" he said. "Unfortunately a busy man has to deny himself many such enjoyments." The area of Dr. Vallotson's business for that afternoon

had been circumscribed by his study arm-chair. "You mentioned, of course, how much pleasure it would have given me to be present?"

The gesture with which Mrs. Vallotson replied put it beyond the possibility of doubt that everything propriety demanded of her had been done and said by her in the course of the afternoon. She glanced across the table at Connie, and continued,—

"Every one thought that Connie was looking well; and people were quite pleased to see her back. You had a pleasant afternoon, I'm sure, child!"

The air of supercilious toleration of the world at large, which had succeeded the haughty contempt for her fellow-creatures induced by Bryan Armitage's conduct, slipped away from Constance as she answered her mother.

"People were very kind, mother. I enjoyed it very much."

The last part of Constance's speech passed unheeded. As she spoke the door was opened with a quick, firm touch, and Mrs. Vallotson turned her head sharply as North Branston entered.

"I am late!" he said. "I am sorry, Adelaide."

The apology, so curt as to be hardly worthy the name, was uttered in a dry, indifferent tone; he passed on to his seat without another word, and Mrs. Vallotson followed him with her eyes. The air of dominance before alluded to became accentuated as the triumph in her eyes became a trifle more apparent and aggressive.

Twenty-four hours had elapsed since the interview which had taken place in the drawing-room during the absence of Dr. Vallotson and his daughter, and the two who had held that interview had hardly met, as it happened—and that only for a moment in passing—since it took place.

"I thought you expected to be in time to-night, North," said Mrs. Vallotson; her tone, masterful and rebuking, carried out the suggestion of her face. "It can't always be helped, I suppose, but when it's only a question of ten minutes you might manage to be more punctual, I think."

North Branston was dining now with uninterested rapidity. He was looking, as he had looked on the previous evening, fagged and tired; but more definite than the weariness of his face was the expression of hard indifference which seemed to have grown upon him in the last twenty-four hours, until it might have stood between himself and the world in which he moved—or between two sides of his own being—like a wall. The only sign which showed that he had heard Mrs. Vallotson's speech was a slight movement of his eyebrows.

"Where have you come from?"

The question came from Dr. Vallotson; it was shortly and testily put, as if, though his professional instinct prevented his enforcing the matter of his wife's rebuke, he was more than willing to subscribe to the feeling behind it.

"Miller's Lane," returned North briefly.

"Miller's Lane!" repeated Mrs. Vallotson, "Oh, have you seen that child I told you of—Mrs. Pearson's child?" Then, as North made a slight gesture of negation, she went on angrily: "Really I think you might have managed a little thing like that!"

"I saw it yesterday—there was no need to see it to-day."

"You are ready enough to make work for yourself as a rule!" said Mrs. Vallotson, with a sneer. "And that reminds me," she went on—the indulgence of her mood seemed to have strengthened it, and her voice was

sharper and more directly commanding—"have you sent in your acceptance to the cottage hospital committee? I've been asked a dozen times this afternoon what you are going to do about it. It's quite time the acceptance was sent!"

She paused, demanding an answer, and as though he felt the gaze of her hard, dark eyes, North looked up and met them.

"I sent it to-day," he said grimly.

For a moment the two pair of eyes, one so full of triumph, the other so full of contempt, met and held one another in silence. Then the pause was broken in an eager, fussy tone of voice by Dr. Vallotson.

"The cottage hospital!" he said, "dear me, yes! The cottage hospital at Hatherleigh. And that reminds me—Hatherleigh reminds me, to speak more correctly—that I had a letter this afternoon—I meant to tell you of it, my dear. A very pleasant circumstance!"

Mrs. Vallotson turned from North Branston with a smile—a rare thing with her—just touching her lips. She stretched out her hand carelessly as her husband spoke, and drew a dish of pears towards her.

"What is it?" she said. "Constance, why don't you have a pear?"

"It seems," continued Dr. Vallotson, importantly, "that Hatherleigh Grange is taken at last."

"So I was told several times this afternoon," observed Connie. "But no one had heard who had taken it."

"You've heard, I suppose, Robert?" said Mrs. Vallotson. "Are they desirable people? Give me a steel knife, Connie. I can't peel a pear with this."

"My letter," continued Dr. Vallotson, evidently intending to make the most of his communication, "is from an old friend of mine in London—really a man who might have been supposed to have forgotten my

existence, so many years it is since we met. It was extremely gratifying to me to hear from him, I can assure you ! ”

“ And what does he say ? ” demanded Mrs. Vallotson.

“ It seems, my dear, that the new tenant of Hatherleigh Grange, Sir William Karlake—”

There seemed to be no particular reason why Dr. Vallotson’s pompous, well-pleased tones should have stopped. No one had spoken. The firm, deliberate movements with which his wife was peeling her pear had ceased suddenly ; ceased with a harsh grating sound as of the knife upon the plate, and she was looking straight across the table at him. But that was all. Dr. Vallotson was vaguely surprised at himself.

“ That Sir William Karlake, as I said,” he continued emphatically and self-assertively, “ is a patient of my friend Carson’s. He is something of an invalid, and in settling in the neighbourhood applied to Carson for information as to the medical men here. Carson, of course, mentioned me. Of course, in my position he could do nothing else. But he has written me a very pleasant letter on the subject, and he adds that Lady Karlake is a connection of his and that she hopes to make our acquaintance—your acquaintance, my dear, of course ! Very friendly of Carson it is, very proper indeed. They will be quite an acquisition. Sir William Karlake you know, my dear ; he has been a great man in India. His father was Sir Stephen Karlake, who was celebrated in connection with the Mutiny.”

“ And is Sir William Karlake the new tenant of Hatherleigh Grange ? ”

The words came from Mrs. Vallotson, after a moment’s dead silence, in a voice so hard as to be hardly audible. As she spoke her hands began to move again, mechanically as it seemed, and she cut her pear into small pieces.

"Yes, my dear, that is exactly—"

But Dr. Vallotson's pompous tones were interrupted. North Branston had been leaning back in his chair, taking no part—taking no interest evidently—in the conversation. His gloomily downcast eyes were fixed, as it happened, on Mrs. Vallotson's plate, and as Dr. Vallotson spoke they quickened suddenly as though their inattentive vision had been attracted. He leaned a little forward, evidently hardly realizing, owing to his previous inattention, that he was interrupting.

"Take care, Adelaide," he said coldly. "You've cut yourself."

A drop or two of bright red was staining Mrs. Vallotson's knife, though the movement of her fingers continued mechanically. At the sound of North Branston's voice, quiet as it was, she started; started so violently and uncontrollably that the knife, tightly gripped and wielded with a strange pressure, slipped suddenly, and the next instant the blood was pouring from a ghastly wound in her hand.

Before their horrified exclamations could break from Constance and Dr. Vallotson, North, with the readiness of his profession, had reached Mrs. Vallotson's side. Her face was ashen and drawn, and only her eyes seemed to stand out from the stupor which had crept with incredible swiftness over every feature. They stared up into North Branston's face, and she lifted her uninjured hand and pushed him feebly from her. Then her head fell back, and she fainted.

CHAPTER V.

"ONE can't have everything, I suppose ! We feel a little dubious on certain points, but if the case had been different we should only have felt a little dubious on certain other points, I take it."

"Whether the points in question now are not rather important—eh, Masters ? Seems so to me, you know !"

The two speeches—the one slow and ponderous, as of a man who feels his words to carry weight, the other nervous and tentative, as of a meek man—possessed, for all their difference, one characteristic in common—a species of ruminating dissatisfaction. And, as the last speaker paused, he glanced round him, as though vaguely conscious that the sense of the meeting was with him.

The meeting consisted of a group of men which would have struck awe into the breast of any average inhabitant of Alnchester, though it could hardly be said to be intrinsically awe-inspiring in appearance. It was composed of about a dozen of the most prominent men, alike of the precincts and the town, who sat shoulder to shoulder, oblivious of the yawning gulf between them. The first speaker—a large, slow man with sandy hair and beard : Mr. Masters, the Mayor of Alnchester, sat at one end of the table—and the man who had answered him was one of the principal tradesmen of the town—a very wealthy grocer. At the other end of the table, acting as chairman,

was the Dean. The rest of the meeting consisted of several of the canons ; young Mr. Eliot, the banker's son, the leading solicitor of the place ; and old Dr. Rivers, who was Dr. Vallotson's friendly rival. There was an empty place next Dr. Rivers which Dr. Vallotson should have filled, and there was also an empty chair at the chairman's right hand.

The room was one in the town hall used for committee meetings and so forth, and the group assembled represented the committee formed for the establishment of a cottage hospital for children ; it was, for the moment, Alnchester's special hobby, and was to be located at Hatherleigh, a village about three miles from the town. The business of the meeting had not, however, begun as yet. It was evidently waiting the arrival of something or someone ; and as evidently the members of the committee were occupied in tentatively carping and disparaging comment.

"A rather more sympathetic man would have been better, no doubt !" observed one of the canons regretfully, in response to the last speaker's tacit appeal. "But Dr. Branston's skill is very valuable."

"Oh, there's no doubt about his brains ! He's a clever fellow enough—if only he didn't take such care to let you know it !"

The words came from young Mr. Eliot, and the disparaging testimony to North Branston's powers was uttered with a rather bitter sneer. The word was taken up by Mr. Masters.

"The long and short of it is," he observed sententially, "that we had no choice, and we must just make the best of things as they are. We cannot approve entirely of Dr. Branston, and that is the fact. We don't like free-thinking in Alnchester, and a man who is never seen inside a place of worship mustn't look to stand well

among us. But failing Dr. Rivers and Dr. Vallotson, Dr. Branston is evidently the man for this particular post, and no doubt in many ways he'll fill it very well."

"I endorse that sentiment very heartily, Mr. Masters. I consider that we are fortunate—exceptionally fortunate, I may say—in having so valuable a brain as North Branston's at our service. And for the rest—well, gentlemen, as we are talking quite informally, perhaps it will not be taken amiss if I suggest that the subject of our discussion is hardly justly appreciated."

The speaker was a tall, thin, grey-haired man who sat at the Dean's left hand—Archdeacon French by name, one of the canons of Alnchester. His face, lined and worn into a suggestion of considerably greater age than was implied in the colour of his hair, was very delicately and strongly cut, and was conspicuously noticeable for a certain expression of quiet observance which characterized it. His voice was at once firm and gentle, and the tone of his last words, which was that of delicate suggestion rather than of assertion or reproof, was particularly attractive. He was listened to with a deference which showed that he was a personage in Alnchester. But the deference was tinged in almost every face with dissent more or less open, and his words were succeeded by a silence.

The silence was broken by a quick step in the passage outside ; the door opened, and North Branston came in.

"I am afraid I am behind time, gentlemen," he said, "I beg to apologize."

The faces of the committee, one and all of which had turned towards the door as it opened, were rather a curious study. Each had changed slightly ; each had developed, in place of the previous more or less pronounced dissatisfaction, a certain reserve ; a reserve which was in some cases merely non-committal, while in others it

accentuated itself into suspicion or distrust, or even positive dislike. Obviously, Alnchester had not bestowed upon North Branston, as a resident, that goodwill which it had withheld from him as an occasional visitor.

Nor was the fact wholly surprising, if taken in conjunction with North's expression and demeanour at the present moment ; though perhaps cause and effect were capable of transposition. He had spoken briefly, and now, as he walked up the room in response to the Dean's invitation to the chair at his right hand, there was an indifferent composure about him which was neither conciliatory nor deferential. His deep-set eyes were more contemptuous than usual as he surveyed the meeting, and the cynical set of his lips more pronounced.

"My first and most pleasant duty," began the Dean, after having formally opened the meeting, "is to express our great pleasure, Dr. Branston, at your acceptance of the post of visiting physician to the proposed hospital. I feel that I am expressing the feeling of the committee when I say that we are highly sensible of the sacrifice involved to so busy a man as yourself, and that we are fully conscious that the position could not be more adequately filled."

The formal speech was spoken with stately propriety ; the words expressed no more than the Dean's honest opinion on the matter ; but there were reserves in his mind with reference to North Branston, and there was no geniality about the tone. His words were followed by a murmur of assent, civil but not hearty. Only Archdeacon French's "Quite so ! Quite so !" rang out pleasantly.

"You are very good !" said North. "I consider myself honoured by the appointment !" His dry voice took a slightly ironical tone, and young Mr. Eliot leaned suddenly back in his chair. "As my time is, as you say,

somewhat limited, may I suggest that the necessary business should be transacted without delay? "

It was not precisely a harmonious hour that followed, though the disturbing element never rose to the surface. Between the tendency of the committee to carp openly or covertly at Dr. Branston's statements and proposals; and Dr. Branston's dry and scathing disposal of unfeasible alternatives and irrelevant discussion; between the necessity for dealing judiciously alike with the grocer's sour distrust of the newcomer, the disposition of some of the canons to maunder benevolently on the subject of sick children in the abstract, and the unconcealed hostility to North which young Mr. Eliot took less and less pains to control; the Dean's position as chairman was far from a sinecure. By the time the hour was over, North Branston's face was darker and more grim than usual; and when the meeting was finally adjourned, he parted from his colleagues with a curt and comprehensive "Good day, gentlemen! "

He was striding towards the door alone, leaving the committee in confidential groups about the room, when Archdeacon French, who had ably seconded the Dean in the steering of his difficult course, disengaged himself from the group to which he belonged, and followed him to the door.

"Good-bye, Branston! " he said, holding out a cordial hand and looking pleasantly into the younger man's face. "By-the-bye, can you come and dine with me one night this week—just ourselves, you know? The day after to-morrow, shall we say? Good! "

He shook hands heartily, and North went on his way.

It was nearly one o'clock, and his way lay homeward. His face had not relaxed from the set which it had brought from the committee room, when, as he had cleared the town and was beginning to breast the hill, he

heard quick steps behind him, and a voice calling his name,—

“Branston! I say, what a pace!”

It was Bryan Armitage, and as he reached North's side he went on cheerily,—

“I've been dashing after you all through the town. I'm going up your way—supposing you are going home—and I thought we might as well walk up together. It'll train me a bit!” he added, with a laugh.

“All right!” was the terse assent. And North Branston resumed a modified edition of his long stride.

Bryan Armitage glanced up at his face with a quick look of perception in his blue eyes.

“You've been to the hospital committee meeting, haven't you?” he said. “I say, North, can you tell me how it is that when all our Alnchester bosses are such first-rate fellows if you take them individually, they should become such a lot of funny old potterers when you get 'em in committee?”

He paused; looking up with his eyes twinkling; and North, compelled to an answer apparently by his silence, shook his head.

“I can't tell you,” he said grimly.

“But you're not prepared to deny the fact, anyhow? I say, North, having just seen them at it! No, I thought not!” He laughed jollily, and then stopped rather suddenly. “It's an awfully fine thing that you've taken the business up, North,” he said, and the face which he turned to North was eloquent in every line with boyish admiration. “I'm no end glad!”

The tribute was accepted with a gesture only, but Bryan Armitage appeared unconscious of any ungraciousness.

“I hope no end it will work,” he went on. “It'll be a jolly thing for the little kids, won't it?”

This very simple edition of the elaborate platitudes delivered by sundry members of the committee was not snubbed by North Branston. They had come to a fork in the road, and Bryan had stopped, indicating that his way was no longer North's. In the boy's face was an enthusiastic hero-worship ; in the man's an odd tolerance and a half-formed envy.

"I hope the kids will appreciate it," he said, with a smile. "Good-bye!"

"Good-bye," returned the other. "Oh, I say, North, by-the-bye, how's Connie?"

North paused as if the question came upon him as rather irrelevant.

"She's all right, I believe," he said. "You've seen her since she came home, haven't you?"

"Oh, yes," was the rapid answer. "I've seen her all right. A week ago, at the meeting. She's rather altered, isn't she?"

He did not wait for an answer, but walked off rapidly with a wave of his hand.

Another five minutes brought North to Dr. Vallotson's house. He opened the door and was walking quickly towards his own room, when the drawing-room door opened and Constance came towards him.

"Wait a moment, North," she said. Constance had never been taught to address North Branston as "uncle." "Mother's hand is very painful. She has not said so, of course, but one can see that she is in pain. It ought to be seen to, I'm sure."

"Is Dr. Vallotson out?" demanded North. "He looked at it this morning, I suppose?"

"I don't know when he will be in," returned the girl loftily, looking at him with hard, condemning young eyes, "or I should not have asked you to see to it. But I'm sure the bandages are too tight or something."

"Where is she?"

"In the drawing-room, writing letters." And without deigning to express her sense of his reluctance by another word, Constance passed him and went upstairs.

With an extra fold in his forehead and compressed lips North Branston strode on and went into the drawing-room.

"Constance tells me your hand is worse, Adelaide," he said abruptly.

Mrs. Vallotson was sitting at her writing-table with her back to the door. In spite of Constance's words, however, she was not writing at the moment; her pen lay idle on the blotting-paper, and she was sitting almost rigidly erect, looking straight before her. Presumably she was pausing for consideration between two letters. Presumably also her thoughts had been somewhat intent, and had prevented her hearing the door open, for at the first sound of North Branston's voice she started violently, almost convulsively, but without turning round. A second or two elapsed, during which he waited for an answer, and then she moved her head slowly and looked towards him.

The wound in Mrs. Vallotson's hand, though it was unpleasant enough, had not at first seemed to her husband likely to be a long affair in healing, taking into consideration her robust frame. But the week that had since elapsed had falsified these first impressions. Not only had the shock and the loss of blood told on her extraordinarily, unhinging her nerves and producing a strange state of fever, but the wound itself had inflamed, and even now showed little sign of healing. The face she turned to North Branston now bore eloquent testimony to the suffering it had caused her; suffering which in so strong a woman seemed out of all proportion to the cause. It was the face of a woman who had not

slept for nights, and whose every nerve was tense with pain. Her cheeks were haggard, and her lips were pale. The lines into which her mouth was compressed were cut deep. His eyes were sunken and burning, and there was an indefinable kind of fierceness in them.

They gazed across the room at North Branston, and apparently her physical distress stood between her and the irritability which he usually created in her. She looked at him as though she saw him a long way off. The next instant, as if by an unconscious effort of will, a film passed across the singular wildness of her eyes, and she turned them hurriedly away from him.

"Constance is mistaken!" she said. Her voice was as unlike itself as was her face. It was loud and strained.

North, who had been observing her with unmoved professional eyes, drew a step or two nearer to her.

"You are in great pain, Adelaide!" he said coldly. "You had better let me see what I can do for you." With a movement which in a person of her physique was extraordinarily nervous, she shrank back as he approached, and he stopped instantly, with a slight contraction of the muscles of his mouth.

"No! no!" she said. "It's nothing! It's no worse than it has been. You couldn't do anything."

Her eyes wandered restlessly and painfully about the room as she spoke, as though dreading to rest upon his figure, and her usually abrupt decision of speech was totally absent. Her words hurried out one after another as though one statement alone were insufficient—insufficient, strange as it seemed and eloquently as it testified to the state of her nerves, to defend her from him.

North Branston shrugged his shoulders and waited a moment. Then he said abruptly,—

"Where is Dr. Vallotson?"

There was a moment's dead pause. Apparently Mrs. Vallotson had realized her own want of self-control, and the silence was due to her determination to master herself before she spoke again. Her face was set like marble, and her voice was almost toneless in its composure.

"He was called to Hatherleigh Grange," she said. "The new people arrived two days ago, it seems."

"What time did he go?"

"At about eleven."

"Then he will be back before long," said North, turning on his heel. "If you prefer to wait for him, it is as you choose, of course, Adelaide!"

She made no answer, and he crossed the room to the door. His hand was on the latch, and he was going out without glancing at her again, when Mrs. Vallotson stopped him.

"North!" she said.

"Well?"

"Have you refused that appointment?"

North Branston did not answer for a moment, nor did he turn to her.

"Do you mean the London appointment?"

"Yes."

"I have refused it!" he said grimly. "If you have decided that you would like to get rid of me, Adelaide, it is too late."

He left the room without another word, and she turned mechanically to her writing-table.

There was no written letter upon it, however, a quarter of an hour later, when the luncheon bell rang and she rose slowly and heavily. North and Constance were waiting for her in the dining-room, and the three sat down to lunch in silence.

The meal was nearly over, and the silence, as far as Mrs. Vallotson was concerned, was unbroken, when the front door opened under a rather irritable touch, and Dr. Vallotson's voice was heard speaking to his groom. His words were lost in a sudden exclamation from Constance.

"Mother," she said, "how you started! I'm quite sure you feel worse than you say."

Mrs. Vallotson, her face a singular grey colour from the throb of her nerves which had called forth the girl's words, turned upon her with glittering eyes.

"Don't talk nonsense, Constance!" she said. "I don't like it."

Her tone was one which the girl had never heard before. With a quick movement, half wonder, half resentment, Constance drew back, biting her lip, as her father came into the room.

There was a mixture of testiness and satisfaction in Dr. Vallotson's face, and his first words spoke to the former feeling.

"Tut, tut!" he said fretfully, as he moved round the room to his chair. "I'm tired to death. Such roads! Upon my word, the state of the country is a disgrace. What have you got there, my dear?"—this to his wife in a slightly mollified tone. "Cutlets? Very well."

Having received his lunch with some disfavour, expressed in a variety of more or less inaudible grunts and groans, the more satisfactory point of view appeared gradually to assert itself. He turned to North with an unusually tolerant expression.

"Well," he said, "I couldn't get to the committee meeting, after all. I hope you explained that I had intended to be there; fully intended it, as you know. A call from Hatherleigh Grange—that was what prevented me."

He paused and applied himself with increased relish to his lunch, a benign air of self-importance dawning on his features. His speech received no verbal reply, North Branston responding with a gesture, and he went on with growing satisfaction and self-congratulation.

"I've paid a very pleasant call," he said, "very pleasant indeed ! Dear me ! what a fine place it is to be sure."

The observation was received with indifferent silence by North. Mrs. Vallotson, judging from the set of her face, was hardly attending. The pain in her hand was evidently making heavy demands upon her endurance. So Constance said, with rather supercilious interest,—

"Hatherleigh Grange, father ? "

"Yes, my dear ; yes. Hatherleigh Grange. I don't fancy you've ever been there. But you'll go before long, of course. Very pleasant people," he continued, making the announcement to his wife. "Very pleasant indeed. Sir William was most cordial in the way of showing me over the place—improvements, and so on, you know. Dear me ! what a lot of money they must have spent over it. He expressed himself in a most friendly way as to Lady Karslake's anxiety to make your acquaintance, my dear. I did not have the pleasure of meeting her ladyship, I regret to say, but I have no doubt that you will find her an acquisition—quite an acquisition."

All Dr. Vallotson's irritability had disappeared ; he was in a state of irrepressible elation. He paused a moment, and then continued with pompous expansiveness,—

"You'll want the carriage to take you out to Hatherleigh, of course ! Now, when would you think of calling, Adelaide, my love ? "

For the first time since her husband's communicative vein developed itself, Mrs. Vallotson moved. She had been sitting erect with one clenched hand resting on the table. Now she leaned back in her chair, looking straight before her.

"I don't intend to call!" she said.

Her voice was almost strident in its determination, and even North Branstons' eyebrows moved slightly as Constance turned quickly towards her. For a moment no one spoke. Then Dr. Vallotson, to whose forehead a faint pink flush had mounted, cleared his throat.

"I—I hardly think I understand you, my dear," he said. "You don't intend to call on Lady Karslake?"

"No!"

"My dear!" Dr. Vallotson's voice had risen several notes in the course of his previous speech, and he took up the word now on a higher note still, and in a tone which he very seldom ventured upon with his wife. The pink upon his forehead had deepened perceptibly; the irascibility which pervaded him on his first entrance was evidently stronger in character, and nearer the surface than usual. "I—I think you hardly understand the position. Lady Karslake expects it!"

Mrs. Vallotson did not move. A singular little spasmodic smile touched the icy composure of her face.

"I am hardly prepared to be dictated to by Lady Karslake's expectation!" she said.

A kind of choke came from her husband—an inarticulate sound expressive of such boundless incredulity and indignation as habit hardly permitted him to express. He pushed back his plate and sat drumming on the table with his napkin-ring, facing Mrs. Vallotson with a weak and angry self-assertion dawning on his face.

"The circumstances of the case," he began loftily; "I—I mean—the demands of common civility—taking

into consideration that the preliminary steps have already been taken——" His voice was rising higher and higher when his wife interrupted him.

"If you had taken the trouble to ascertain my views on the subject, the preliminary steps would not have been taken," she said. "The Grange is a county place. I do not care for the position involved in a calling acquaintance there! I shall not call!"

The harsh decision with which she spoke was even an accentuation of a tone which, as a usual thing, reduced Dr. Vallotson to silence. North Branston, who had sat with folded arms, a frowning, but otherwise indifferent, listener to the discussion, pushed back his chair and rose as assuming that the conversation was concluded. But Dr. Vallotson's temper was evidently not in its normal condition. The flush upon his forehead had spread all over his face, and had changed from pink to crimson. The little, spare figure seemed to inflate itself with angry pomposity. His position in opposing his wife was so rare as to be desperate; and his consciousness of the fact hurled him to extremes and clothed his daring with violence.

"There may be two opinions on that point!" he said, in a high-pitched voice. "I consider that your refusal to do so is an insult to my friends—an insult which I will not permit—will not permit, I say! That people like Sir William and Lady Karslake, county people, and people well known to the world, should be good enough to wish for our acquaintance, and that they should be treated as—as you propose, would be—would be—scandalous! Scandalous, and nothing else!"

Mrs. Vallotson rose abruptly.

"Robert," she said, "you are forgetting yourself!" She glanced quickly round to where Constance, with

her cheeks indignantly flushed, sat gazing loftily into space. "Go away, child!" she said. But Dr. Vallotson's emotion had passed beyond his control.

"Understand me!" he continued, emphasizing his words with a hand that shook with anger. "I insist! I say that I insist!"

He had risen excitedly to his feet as he spoke, and the last word was emphasized by a violent stamp of his foot. The movement was hardly made when his pompous little figure, quivering with passion, collapsed suddenly into the chair behind him with an inarticulate groan of self-pity.

"Confound it!" he said. "I had a twinge last night. Gout, of course. Oh!" with another groan. "Oh, confound it! Plague take it! I'm in for a sharp attack!"

Half an hour later Dr. Vallotson, with his foot swathed in the regulation fashion, was established in his study, a victim to the severest pangs of gout. He was querulous and irritable to the world at large; but to his wife, who had superintended the arrangements for his comfort in grim silence, he was meekness itself. In his present predicament nothing unconnected with his personal discomfort was of the slightest consequence to him.

CHAPTER VI.

ABSOLUTELY insignificant trifles will sometimes interfere seriously with really important works. To a superior woman, with a mission for the creation of a sphere, the existence of a father suffering from the gout may prove, for the moment, an actual hindrance.

In the slight demoralization of the household habits involved in Dr. Vallotson's illness, Constance found herself so drawn into the stream of household duties that she had scarcely an hour in the day which she could call her own.

The demand on her services came by no means exclusively from her father. Dr. Vallotson, though he submitted to have the paper read to him by his daughter, and expressed a modified satisfaction in her society, was by no means clamorous for it. But since Dr. Vallotson's illness her mother seemed to have become possessed by an insatiable desire for the girl's society and assistance. The desire was expressed—or rather demonstrated, for it never was put into words—in a hard, matter-of-fact fashion, which concealed the fact that some touch of feverish weakness lay at the bottom of it ; perhaps a sense of helplessness arising from the continued uselessness of her left hand ; perhaps a more general sense of physical incapacity, induced by the strain of attending to her husband at a time when her accident had left her slightly unstrung. Innumerable little domestic offices were

assigned to Constance, which kept her always about the house and in touch with her mother. When Mrs. Vallotson was with her husband, Constance was always summoned to sit with him also. When Mrs. Vallotson was alone, Constance must perforce keep her company.

Constance Vallotson had belonged, at Girton, to a set of young women whose ages ranged between eighteen and three-and-twenty years, and who had mapped out life with great satisfactoriness and completeness in a series of theories. One of these theories held that it was beneath the dignity of a truly superior woman to allow herself to be disturbed or annoyed by anything that might befall her. Consequently it is obvious that the expression which developed upon Constance's face, and the angle which became habitual to her chin during the days of Dr. Vallotson's martyrdom, can have had nothing to do with such inferior emotions as impatience and irritability.

And yet, as she pushed open the door of her own room on the fourth afternoon, it might have been said by a superficial observer that Constance Vallotson looked distinctly cross. She had just retreated, lunch being over, with a haste and secrecy which were not compatible with dignity, and her consciousness of the fact was ruffling. She had spent the whole morning looking over household linen with her mother ; and she had in her pocket a long, earnest letter from a Girton friend, full of lofty views and intellectual depths, and burning with anxiety as to the effect already produced on Alnchester by the presence of "an enlightened mind."

To answer this letter, to expatiate on the field before her, and to theorize loftily on the momentary hindrances about her, would be a task—as Constance felt—calculated to restore her to the enjoyment of that lofty disdain which was her normal attitude of mind. She shut the

door of her room, sat down at the writing-table, and prepared to refresh herself accordingly.

She had finished the third closely-written sheet, and a lofty calm was settling upon her features, when the door behind her opened abruptly. The calm disappeared as if by magic before a frank, unrestrained girlish irritability, and Constance turned, absolutely petulantly. The intruder was Mrs. Vallotson, and as the girl became aware of the fact her expression changed again. Her temper, like her supercilious self-assurance, was dominated by her mother's personality.

"There you are, child," said Mrs. Vallotson briefly. "Your father wants you to read to him."

"Has North been to him yet, mother?"

Dr. Vallotson exacted of North Branstons a midday professional visit and report as to the practice, at which Constance's presence was not desired. He had not as yet come in from his morning's round, and Constance's question contained the possibility of a reprieve for her.

Almost as she finished speaking, Mrs. Vallotson, who had been standing with her hand on the door, pushed it open and stood for a moment listening intently to sounds in the hall below.

"No," she said harshly and hurriedly; "there he is now. Come down in about half an hour, Constance."

Before the girl could answer, Mrs. Vallotson had shut the door upon her and was going swiftly downstairs. Her face had lost nothing of its new haggardness in the course of the last three or four days. On the contrary, that drawn set of her features seemed to be sharpened by an air of intense, restless vitality which seemed to pervade her. As she passed, quick and resolute, along the passage to Dr. Vallotson's study, her lips were parted with a curious suggestion of breathlessness, and there was a slight grey shade about them. She seemed to make a strange point of being present during North's visits to

her husband. The fact had been noticeable during each of the preceding days. And now, as she opened the door of Dr. Vallotson's study and glanced round the room, though only a minute or two had elapsed since she heard North Branston enter the house, she said quickly,—

“Has North been in?”

Dr. Vallotson, the solitary occupant of the room, looked up with his face puckered into a suppressed testiness.

“No,” he said. “No, he has not. Has he come in? It's getting very late.”

“He's having lunch, I suppose,” said Mrs. Vallotson.

“He came in just now.”

She crossed the room as she spoke and began, with her uninjured hand, to sort and put tidy a miscellaneous collection of books and newspapers which lay on a table. Her movements were very quick and tense.

“He is very late,” repeated Dr. Vallotson fussily. “I cannot think what should have kept him. Let me see, now, what has he for this afternoon? There's old Bronson—he must certainly be seen—and Mrs. Jones. I think that's all.”

North Branston's day's work, as far as Dr. Vallotson's consideration of it was concerned, consisted solely of those half-dozen cases which, had his health permitted, the latter gentleman would have taken himself; cases, for the most part, consisting of old inhabitants of Alnchester who suffered principally from hypochondria, and who enjoyed a gossip with a doctor. Neither of the cases to which Dr. Vallotson had alluded by name was of a more serious nature, and there was nothing whatever to disturb him in connection with them. And yet as Dr. Vallotson said the last words he fidgeted, moved his gouty foot testily, and groaned. Then he leaned back in his chair and drummed hesitatingly on its arm.

“There's Hatherleigh!” he said. “Now, I wonder—

I wonder whether Sir William Karslake will be expecting me?"

He seemed to be half thinking aloud, putting out a feeler—after the manner of weak men—towards some help in coming to a decision on a question he was reluctant to answer. Mrs. Vallotson was doing her work steadily and neatly, in spite of her crippled condition, but it evidently exacted all her attention, for she did not turn round or answer on the instant, and Dr. Vallotson continued. The almost unprecedented discussion with his wife on the subject of the Karslakes was practically forgotten by him. That is to say, the question which he had argued, with temper due to oncoming gout, had become a matter of indifference to him, since it affected his comfort of the moment not at all; and he was considerably exercised by the question which was disturbing his mind at this moment, and needed the relief of words.

"Four days it is, isn't it, since I was there?" he said, cogitating with evident reluctance. "Well, I don't know—perhaps North had better—and yet I don't feel sure that Sir William would like it. What—now, what should you advise, my dear?"

His tone was eloquent of desire that Sir William should not like it. He was evidently torn between the desire of keeping the new patient to himself, and the fear lest Sir William Karslake should feel himself neglected. Against the tentative weakness and jealousy of his self-important tones, his wife's voice, as she answered him, seemed to ring with extraordinarily harsh decision. "You will be able to go yourself in a day or two," she said. "North has quite patients enough."

The words implied no consideration for North Brans-ton's time; they rather answered to the note of jealousy in Dr. Vallotson's tone. And as she finished speaking, North himself entered the room.

As though his wife's tone had been by no means without effect upon him, Dr. Vallotson received the younger man rather cavalierly. A sharp cross-examination ensued as to the morning's work—in which all North's own patients were ignored—to which North Branston submitted with dry indifference.

The morning being disposed of, and a momentary pause following, North turned to Mrs. Vallotson. She stood by the window with her back to the two men, silent and still.

"Adelaide," he said, "I had better look at your hand now."

The condition of Mrs. Vallotson's wounded hand had improved gradually during the last few days, but it still required medical attention. Dr. Vallotson found that his own suffering did not allow him to look to it properly, so that North had to supply his place.

He had spoken in a cold, business-like tone, and for an instant she took no notice; then she turned slowly, and held out her hand, still without turning her eyes towards him as he came towards her. A more reluctant doctor and patient it would have been impossible to imagine.

He unrolled the bandages in silence with deft fingers, and then, as though the constraint of the position affected him in spite of himself, he glanced round to Dr. Vallotson and said,—

"Where can I go for you this afternoon?"

The needs of old Mr. Bronson and of Mrs. Jones were laid before him with pompous minuteness, and as Dr. Vallotson finished his instruction North said briefly,—

"What about Hatherleigh Grange?" He paused and glanced up at Mrs. Vallotson. "Did I hurt you, Adelaide?" Then, as she made no answer, he continued: "Is there any need to go there?"

Dr. Vallotson's answer was sharp-toned and decisive in proportion to his previous uncertainty.

"Certainly not!" he said. "I shall go there myself in a day or two! You'll have quite enough to do to get through your afternoon's work, as it is."

North made the slightest possible gesture of acquiescence.

"As you like!" he said. "That's finished, Adelaide. There's nothing more, then?"

And a moment later he had left the room.

Dr. Vallotson's words as to North Branston's afternoon's work, little as their speaker realized the facts of the case, were perfectly true. Old Mr. Bronson and Mrs. Jones found themselves disposed of in about seven minutes each; and their subsequent strictures to their respective families on Dr. Branston and all his ways and works were far from complimentary. Nevertheless, four hours, and four very hard-working hours, had elapsed before North Branston reached his home again.

A day's work such as North had accomplished is calculated to produce fatigue enough to temper the geniality of the most genial of men. It was the night of his dinner engagement with Archdeacon French, and North Branston's face as he entered the Archdeacon's drawing-room, tired as it was, was also at its most cynical and impassive.

Archdeacon French was a childless man. His family consisted of his wife, a delicate little woman, who looked older than he did. If Mrs. French was inclined to share the popular view of North Branston, rather than that held by her husband, the fact evinced itself only in a slight touch of stately elaboration in the charming manner with which she invariably welcomed her guests; and her manner chimed absolutely harmoniously with her

husband's greeting. Archdeacon French was not a demonstrative host. He received North with a tacit assurance of pleasure which carried more weight than many words, and with a hand-clasp such as the young man had not met all day—often as his hand had been touched and shaken.

"Only ourselves, as I told you, Branston!" he said, as the gong sounded. "Take in my wife, will you?"

The conversation that ensued during dinner would have seemed to Alnchester, could it have been overheard, almost scandalizing. None of the affairs of local importance; none of those topics of the moment which should naturally have come under discussion between three good citizens; neither the Bishop's bronchitis, the conduct of the Dean's eldest son, nor the imperfect lighting of the High Street, was so much as mentioned. The talk, led by the host, started with a question of European importance, and passed thence to a recent discovery which was exercising the scientific world. Archdeacon French was a good talker, and during the early part of dinner—after one shrewd glance at the grim fatigue written on his guest's face—he practically sustained the conversation. But by degrees his remarks became less complete and more suggestive; and before dinner was over, North Branston was commenting, answering, questioning, with an interest wholly at variance with his usually indifferent demeanour.

"We'll go into the library," said the Archdeacon, coffee and cigars being finished. "My wife is not good for much to-night, and I told her we would not disturb her."

The arrangement was a familiar one to Archdeacon French's guests. North followed him into a comfortable book-lined room at the back of the house, and in response to an invitation to establish himself comfortably, flung

himself into an easy chair. His face had altered marvelously since his entrance into the house ; its stern-passivity had left it, and it was full of keen life and thought ; even the cynicism about the mouth and eyes was no longer indifferent but keenly sentient, as though its resources had been called into play. Archdeacon French established himself in an arm-chair facing him, and continued the discussion which their move had broken off.

"I don't agree with you, Branston," he said ; "and I should like to convince you ! The question itself is no great matter, and we are not called upon to decide it, in any case. But there seem to me to be principles behind !"

"So far we are quite at one," responded North Branston quickly, and though his tone was a little sardonic it was by no means hard. "But when we get to the principles themselves—"

"We part company ?" said the elder man.

He was looking thoughtfully into the fire, and there was a touch of sadness in his voice.

"Have you no faith in the perfectibility of the race, Branston ?"

There was a moment's pause, and then North Branston raised his hand and let it fall heavily upon the arm of his chair.

"None !" he said. "I see tendency in that direction, I see no means by which it may be brought about."

The words were spoken deliberately and heavily. They were a curiously direct confession of faith, and the manner of their utterance testified strikingly to the nature of the talk which had preceded them. Some men may talk for hours on intimate personal matters, and never for an instant get into touch each with the other ; never reveal themselves as they are. Between others, on the

contrary, a discussion of the most abstract subject will establish lines of communication by which the reality in each of the disputants is conveyed to the other insensibly, involuntarily. North Branston and his host had been discussing an educational question ; nothing personal had been said on either side ; but into the conversation from the first, emanating originally from Archdeacon French, and responded to in absolute unconsciousness by North, there had crept that subtle something which is most inadequately described as sympathy : and the final issue as contained in North's final words seemed neither strange nor unexpected.

North Branston's words were succeeded by a silence. The speaker sat gazing into the fire, his eyes full of sombre thought ; he looked as though, with that acceptance of a stern fact to which his words had witnessed, the smaller spirit of contempt was merged for the moment in something greater. Archdeacon French was also looking at the fire ; there was a deep pity in his eyes, and there was a question in them, too. It was he who broke the silence. He changed his position, like a man who introduces a fresh topic of conversation, and glanced up at North Branston's face with a kindly observance, as he said,—

"I heard of you, Branston, the other day from a brother-in-law of mine in London ; Slade-Fenton, you know ? "

North moved and shook off something of his gravity in deference to the Archdeacon's change of tone, as he made a ready gesture of acquiescence.

"I knew Dr. Slade-Fenton was a connexion of yours ! " he said. He paused, and that wider and deeper expression which lingered in his face gradually subsided. "What had Dr. Slade-Fenton to say about me, may I ask ? " he said.

Archdeacon French crossed his legs and looked back again at the fire.

"He has a voice in the appointments at your old hospital," he said. "You had not heard of that, perhaps? It's a new thing? And he wrote to me of his regret that you had refused an offer made you in connection with the hospital a week or so ago!"

Archdeacon French did not look at his guest. Apparently a shrewd delicacy of tact prevented it. But he was keenly conscious of the change in North Branston's face during the moment's pause that followed, and the tone in which his answer came was no surprise to him.

"Dr. Slade-Fenton has always been my good friend!"

The words were formal, almost curt, and North's voice as he spoke them had a bitterly sardonic ring. Archdeacon French ignored alike the tone of the words and the pause that had preceded them.

"Yes," he said. "He has the highest respect for your powers, if I may tell you so. Some part of his regret was selfish, inasmuch as, identifying himself with the place, he felt it would have been very greatly to his advantage that you should have accepted. But he regretted it also on your account. It was a very important appointment, he tells me."

There was a very delicate and sympathetic invitation about the words, and about the tact which still refrained from looking at the young man. But there was a ring of hard reserve about North's voice as he answered briefly,—

"Yes."

Archdeacon French moved. He turned towards North and let his eyes rest on the younger man's face.

"And the refusal was quite inevitable?" he said.

North made a gesture of cynical indifference.

"I suppose so," he said.

For a moment longer Archdeacon French looked at him. Then, as if recognizing the barrier which the other had deliberately raised in place of the sympathetic communion of a little while before, he turned away with a slight gesture—involuntary as it seemed—of tacit sympathy and regret, and began to speak of something else.

He began to speak, but his first words were interrupted. A servant entered the room and came up to North Branston.

"A note for you, if you please, sir. And there's a dog-cart waiting."

With a quick word of apology North opened and read the note, and then turned to his host.

"I must go, unfortunately!" he said. "The note is sent on by Dr. Vallotson, and it is urgent. Good-night and many thanks."

"Good-night," returned the Archdeacon; he held out his hand cordially as he spoke. "I am the loser! You've not a long drive before you, I hope?"

"Three miles," answered North carelessly. "It is to Hatherleigh Grange—the new man there, Sir William Karslake. Do you know him?"

They were at the hall-door by this time, and a moment later North Branston had swung himself into the dog-cart and was being driven rapidly through the town. He took out the note he had received, and read it through again with a keen professional face; read also the notes with which Dr. Vallotson had supplemented it.

Then he spoke to the groom who was driving him.

"Stop at Dr. Vallotson's as you pass," he said. "Here it is."

The man touched his hat and obeyed, and North

jumped down and went quickly into the house, along the passage, and into his own room. He chose out the drugs he had come to seek, and left the room again.

He had just shut the door of the room behind him when the door of the drawing-room opened suddenly, and Mrs. Vallotson came out. She saw him on the instant ; they were indeed almost face to face ; and she stopped short.

She had been moving abruptly, almost violently, and the absolute dead stillness to which her movements gave place produced, in its extraordinary contrast, a very strange effect. For a moment, influenced by it in spite of himself, North also stood motionless, confronting her. The light of the hall-lamp shone full on him, while she stood in shadow ; he could only dimly see her face, but it struck him gradually that it was quite white. She did not move, but stood there with her eyes fixed upon him.

"Is anything the matter, Adelaide ?"

The words came from him almost involuntarily, and they were followed by an instant's dead pause. Then to his great surprise Mrs. Vallotson, still with her eyes fixed on him, broke into a low, harsh laugh.

"No," she said, in an odd, hoarse voice. "No, of course not. You are going to Hatherleigh Grange, are you not ? Why don't you go ?"

"I thought you wanted me," he said curtly. "Good-night."

There was no answer. He strode down the passage and out of the house without looking back.

CHAPTER VII.

THE groom who had been sent from Hatherleigh Grange to fetch Dr. Vallotson had evidently been told to hasten. The dog-cart bowled rapidly along, and in a few minutes it was clear of the town and surrounded by open country.

It was a perfectly cloudless October night. The moon was full, and in the cold radiance of her light every feature of the surrounding landscape stood out clear and distinct. There was a touch of frost in the air ; and, in the wintry clearness of atmosphere thus created, white light and black shadow seemed to lie side by side sharply outlined. The stars were visible in myriads, twinkling and gleaming with that vivid, far-away brilliance which gives so much of its significance to a winter night ; and in the almost leafless trees the bleak wind made a thin, toneless rustling. The cold, far-stretching expanse of earth ; the cold, unfathomable depth of sky ; seemed alike to radiate the chill beauty of inexorable power—a beauty almost alien to men, untouched either by tenderness or sympathy.

North Branston leaned back in his seat with folded arms, glancing neither to the right nor the left. He had hardly moved since the dog-cart left the town.

There is nothing which so stirs and renders poignant the sense of trouble or wrong as that recognition of its presence implied in offered sympathy. There is nothing

so embittering as the act of rejecting sympathy. And yet there are times when such rejection is inevitable. There are times when the current of feeling—whether of resentment, suffering, or endurance—stirred by the sympathetic word, runs so much deeper than is conceived of by the speaker of that word, delicate and kindly though it may be, that communion between the two is almost impossible.

North Branston's refusal of the appointment offered him in London had been the bitterest task that had fallen to his lot for several years. It had galled him to the quick in the doing ; it had galled every hour of his life since, and must continue to do so until time in its passing should have softened to some extent the keen edge of his feeling on the subject. Upon the unspeakable soreness of his spirit even Archdeacon French's sympathy had fallen as something trivial and inadequate. Its bitterness was not the attribute solely of the actual deed. It had its roots far back in the past ; it was the growth of many years, and every thought and consciousness of his life had gone to its envenoming.

Of all the mysteries among which man moves in more or less petulant and unacknowledged ignorance, perhaps there is none more deeply shrouded in darkness than the laws which govern human sympathy and antipathy : those strange twin forces by which men and women are held asunder, or hurled together, as by a power other than their own wills. Sympathy is with us a household word ; discoursed on, played with, abused. Antipathy is a less familiar plaything. The shadow of a weird and unknown power lies about it, and the thing suggested is not without its influence of awe. It is when this shadow lies between two people bound together by close ties of kindred that the terrible substance becomes evident for what it is ; when to the ties of blood life adds the ties of

circumstance, the moral atmosphere created by that inexorable presence is the most poisonous a man can breathe.

In such an atmosphere North Branston had existed since his first childish consciousness had stirred in him. That nameless something which Alnchester had recognized in the relation between the woman and the child of years ago ; which had stimulated interest and quickened curiosity ; had been to the little taciturn boy as the very breath of his life. He knew it, with the unreasoning intuition of childhood, for what it was. He knew its source. The word sister was with him a synonym for a power against which there was no appeal ; which worked perfunctorily for his good ; spontaneously only when he was to be chidden, repulsed, ignored ; an adverse power, in fact. Little North Branston repaid that power not with fear, but with an answering antipathy ; a chill, childish repugnance which nothing seemed to move ; until, as childhood passed away, it developed into the active antagonism of quick-witted, dogmatic youth.

Before this second stage was reached the changes and chances of life had so operated as to loosen, as it seemed, the bonds of circumstance which held the two together. They were no longer alone together. Marriage had given to the one new connections, wider and different interests ; the other was sent out into the world of strangers where he might have found sympathy and given affection. But the changes and chances of life proved powerless before the mysterious laws of antipathy. The married woman with husband, child, household cares, social interests ; the schoolboy with all his schoolboy's duties, pleasures, friends ; seemed to be drawn each out of the world in which they might have lived apart and at peace ; and to be held together in an isolating

chain of opposition which neither might break. North Branston's youth was one blind, fierce, unspoken struggle to accomplish the impossible ; to break the chain that held him, and to escape into a purer air. He was at war with his world. Mrs. Vallotson's household took its tone from its mistress, and North was an alien and a scape-goat to every member of it ; a thorn in the flesh to the master of the house ; a charitable investment from whom, as he was never allowed to forget, heavy returns would be expected. His holidays were one long rankling feud. He carried his bitterness of spirit back to school, and was morose and unpopular. His constant triumphs in his school work were for himself alone. Failure would have been visited upon him, but his success was of interest to no one.

Boyhood passed and left him, as it had found him, bound and powerless. The bitter tide of rebellion which had surged up in him during those boyish years, sank gradually into a dead level of acceptance which was infinitely more bitter in its changeless gloom, and as entirely blind and unconscious. Nobody traced the course of that subsidence. Nobody considered what it implied, or the passage from boyhood to manhood that it involved. If it was vaguely realized in Dr. Vallotson's household that North Branston was less aggressively disagreeable as he grew older, it produced no other effect. No one was interested to discover upon what manner of personality that poisoned air had acted, what manner of man it had developed. That North Branston was hard, cynical, and indifferent, was a fact patent to all who knew him ; but it was a fact that suggested nothing beyond.

The influence that had shadowed his childhood and soured his youth closed inexorably about his manhood, and he subscribed grimly to its decree as to the inevitable. It was Mrs. Vallotson's will that North Branston

should repay her husband by entering into partnership with him. At seven-and-twenty he turned his back deliberately on the promise of an exceptionally brilliant career, to bury himself in a little country town. He turned his back, also, on the hope of freedom, drawn and compelled unconsciously and involuntarily by the mysterious power which dominated him ; and the two so strangely held together—whom no absence, no diversity of interests had severed—were brought once more into the contact of that every-day life which goes on without change or respite month after month, year in, year out.

What the four years that followed had been to North Branston is to be inferred from his reception of the offer of that London appointment to which Archdeacon French had alluded. A fierce acknowledgment of the futility of the life he led ; of its hopeless failure from every point of view ; of its unnecessary misery ; rose in him and became a resolution to end it ; to accept the chance offered him and to go away. When he went to Mrs. Vallotson on the evening following his return with Constance, he went, little as he realized it, braced to face the evil influence of his life, to break it and throw it aside for ever.

His resolution had broken in his hands, his determination had slipped from him unheeded, withered and killed by a breath which seemed to blow up through his life from the remotest days of his childhood, gathering as it came that before which nothing could live. And in the atmosphere it brought about him he ceased to be of value even to himself.

He refused the appointment, and the actual refusal was as a drop in the ocean of his bitterness. The grinding sense of failure, the pitiless reaction from conqueror to conquered, above all the scorching, blighting touch of that poisonous breath, had scared his every nerve.

The dog-cart bowled along through the frosty air, the ring of the horse's hoofs on the dry road sounding out hard and distinct ; it turned sharply round a corner, through an open lodge gate, and stopped before the entrance to a large house of the Tudor style of architecture ; in the all-revealing moonlight every outline and every mullion stood out sharp and distinct, and every pane of glass reflected back the weird, white light. The drive swept round in a wide semicircle, and beyond stretched the open country, well wooded here, and with the river winding its way among the trees.

In another moment the door was opened.

"I am Dr. Branston," said North. "Dr. Vallotson's partner."

The circumstances of Sir William Karslake's introduction to Dr. Vallotson had created no interest in his present patient in North Branston's mind. It was simply a "case" of Dr. Vallotson's that he had come to see ; a case yielded to him with a reluctance which had, by the law of contraries, invested it for him with a certain contemptibility ; a case, according to Dr. Vallotson's diagnosis, entirely uninteresting from a professional point of view, and largely attended with valetudinarianism. He followed the footman through the fine old hall ; up the wide, softly-carpeted staircase ; and across a landing, without a glance at his surroundings, though the decoration about him was both rich enough and in sufficiently admirable taste to attract attention. His guide stopped and knocked rather nervously at a closely shut door ; after a moment's uncertain pause he opened it, and announced in a subdued and tentative voice,—

"Dr. Branston !"

It was a large bedroom into which North Branston advanced. On the dainty dressing-table were sundry

woman's trifles, and its appointments were those of a lady's toilet. At the farther end of the room a second doorway led, as it seemed, into a dressing-room; the door was only partly opened, and through the aperture a woman's figure was vaguely discernible. The only occupant of the room itself was a figure of which North could see only one long, thin hand, which rested on the arm of the high-backed, wide-winged arm-chair by which the rest of the person was concealed. Towards this arm-chair, drawn up before a blazing wood fire, North advanced.

"Dr. Branston? Who the deuce is Dr. Branston? Where's Vallotson? Why the dickens——"

North Branston came round in front of the arm-chair, and the voice stopped suddenly. At the same instant North also came to a standstill. A curious flash of keen professional expression leapt in his deep-set eyes. There was an instant's unconscious pause while the doctor and patient surveyed one another.

The figure in the chair was that, judging from his length of limb, of a tall, spare man who was lying rather than sitting propped up by many cushions in a singularly collapsed attitude. He was wrapped in the ample folds of a loose dressing-gown, and from its dark colouring, and against the dull red of the chair behind, his face and head stood out with startling distinctness. His straight, clear-cut features—the features, in their normal condition, as North's quick eyes told him, of a remarkably handsome man of fifty-five or thereabouts—were pinched and drawn; great drops as of exhaustion or pain stood on his forehead, and the disordered grey hair hung damp and heavy; about his mouth and eyes were faint, blue-grey shadows; and his blue eyes had a misty, unseeing look.

The pause, so brief as to be hardly perceptible, was broken by North Branston.

"I am Dr. Vallotson's partner," he said quietly. "Dr. Vallotson is unfortunately laid up, and I am here in his place."

Sir William Karslake moved slightly and feebly, as with a courteous acknowledgment.

"You are very good," he said. His voice was painfully strained, but no irritability appeared in it; nothing but the courtesy of a very polished gentleman. "May I ask you to find yourself a chair?"

He spoke slowly and with considerable difficulty, and as he paused a slight sound behind him made North turn his head quickly and involuntarily. An indefinite recollection of the woman's figure of which he had caught sight in the room beyond, and an equally indefinite impression of a womanly presence conveyed by the appointments of the bedroom, created in him a vague expectancy, and he waited, with his hand on the chair on which he had proposed to seat himself.

The woman who emerged from the dressing-room, however, was evidently a superior servant; a staid, elderly woman.

"I ought to apologize," his patient went on, as North seated himself, "for bringing you so far at such an hour. But—I have been—in some distress."

The dignified tones were growing yet weaker and more difficult, and North, with a quick gesture which put the apology by, leaned forward, his keen eyes scanning the other man's face, his lips parted to speak. Before the words were uttered, the face on which his eyes were fixed changed slowly. Its drawn lines became convulsed; the grey shadows about the mouth and eyes stole gradually over the whole face; the limp, inert figure became tense and rigid; and Sir William Karslake's very consciousness seemed to be crushed out in the grip of a spasm of mortal agony.

A word from North brought the woman in the background to his side.

"How often has this happened?" he said brusquely.

"Never so bad as to-night, sir," was the prompt answer. The woman was rather pale, but quite composed. "Sir William is subject to little attacks, but I've never seen him as he's been to-night, and I always wait on him when he is unwell, sir."

An hour later North stood with his hand on the latch of the bedroom door, glancing back into the room. He paused a moment, listening to the slow, faint breathing which came from the bed on which his patient lay; then, with a gesture of assurance to the woman, who was sitting by the bedside, he opened the door and went out on to the landing, closing the door quietly behind him.

He hesitated a moment, and looked about him rather uncertainly. He was just moving in the direction of the staircase when another door opened, and a neat lady's-maid came quickly towards him.

"My lady wished me to say that she would be glad to see you before you go, sir," she said.

"I was going to inquire for Lady Karslake," returned North. "I should like to see her at once."

The girl turned quickly and led the way downstairs and across the hall. She opened a door and announced,—

"The doctor, if you please, my lady."

There was a sudden soft rustle, and as North Branstons came round the screen by which the room was protected from the door, he became aware that a tall, slight woman's figure was facing him from the hearthrug on the other side of the room. North was too well accustomed to encountering the unexpected in the exercise of his profession to experience more than a passing sense of

surprise as he became aware in the same instant that Lady Karlslake was a young woman ; and he had realized little further when she received him with a quick, careless little bend of her head.

"My husband is better?" she said. "I am afraid he has been very ill!" She spoke in an eager, impulsive fashion, to which a touch of gracious dignity which pervaded it gave an indefinable charm ; and her voice was singularly sweet and fresh. North Branston answered her with grave composure.

"He is better," he said, "for the time being. But I am sorry to have to tell you that he is still very ill. If you will kindly give the necessary orders, I should like to send a prescription in to Alnchester with as little delay as possible."

She turned very pale, and looked at him for a moment in wide-eyed silence. Then she turned with quick, graceful movements ; and rang the bell sharply, passing on across the room to a writing-table. She took out paper and envelopes and said,—

"Will you write here?" adding to the servant who had answered her summons : "Let one of the grooms be ready at once to ride to Alnchester. Come back for the note as soon as you have let them know."

The man disappeared, and she walked to the fireplace, standing there with one hand resting on the high mantelpiece, her back to North Branston as he wrote.

She was dressed in some sort of soft pinkish stuff made in the fashion of a tea-gown, and the delicate draperies, moving as she moved, and falling now in dainty folds about her, seemed to suit her and express her as no harder outlines could have done. From the crown of her head to the sole of her shoe she was essentially feminine ; feminine in her graceful, impulsive movements, feminine in her graceful, self-possessed repose, feminine

in every change that passed across her mobile face and in every cadence of her musical voice. The charmingly-appointed little room in which she stood, with all its dainty tokens of comfort and refinement pervaded with that indefinable air of common use, was a fitting setting and no more for the vague charm which hung about her. In figure she was tall and slight, as has been said. The head was rather small, and its poise upon her shoulders was one which people called proud or spirited, according to the mood of its owner. She had quantities of waving fair hair bound round the back of her head, now, in a vague and picturesque fashion which harmonized with her gown, and little soft tendrils curled over her forehead. It was a broad forehead, delicately white and smooth, and the beautifully-pencilled eyebrows were several shades darker than her hair. Her features themselves were by no means striking, yet there were many people who described Lady Karlake as "lovely"; again, the adjective was a question of mood. She had unquestionably beautiful eyes, which were sometimes grey, sometimes black, sometimes a dark, deep blue. Her expression changed, it sometimes seemed, with every passing thought; but its sensitiveness seemed to be rather that of a quick temperament than of strong feelings.

The servant re-entered the room; North rose from the writing-table, and she moved and spoke over her shoulder to the latter.

"Please give your own orders," she said.

She spoke with the careless, gracious authority natural to womanhood which has always been deferred to. She waited while North gave the man his instructions in a few brief and concise words, and then, as the door closed upon the servant, she turned.

"My husband has never been so ill as this before,"

she said. "Is it—something fresh? Will it soon pass off?"

She was looking straight at North with her delicate eyebrows slightly contracted and her eyes very dark; and North advanced to her with a certain approving response in his own eyes which made them a shade less indifferent than usual. He knew that not many women would have acted first and asked questions afterwards.

"There appears to be a complication which I had not been led to expect," he said. "The condition involved is one which is not likely to yield immediately to treatment. The attack of to-night is a symptom only of serious illness."

She lifted her head with a quick gesture of distress which was rather pity and regret than acute personal grief.

"Ah!" she said, in a low, impulsive tone. "Poor thing! That is dreadful!" She paused a moment and then said hurriedly, and only just above her breath, her eyes dilating: "He has had frightful pain, hasn't he?" Then as North assented rather grimly, "Ah!" she said again, with a little shuddering breath almost of repulsion. "Poor dear thing!"

She turned away sharply, and there was a moment's silence. North Branston, as he watched her, seemed to be studying the specimen of womanhood before him. Then she said suddenly and solicitously:

"You find Pike a good nurse? She takes care of him properly?"

North Branston looked at her for a moment, and a little contemptuous smile touched his lips. The expression of his eyes indicated that his response was dictated by experimental instincts.

"She seems to be a most competent person," he said

composedly. "But if you would prefer to take her place by-and-by——"

She turned swiftly and confronted him, repudiation and distaste which was almost horror in every line of her face.

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "I couldn't! I don't know anything about nursing, I——" She met his eyes and stopped suddenly. A quick flash of comprehension leapt up in her own, and the dismay in her face melted into a laugh—the half-deprecating, half-wilful laugh of a woman who has never been found fault with.

"That was too bad of you," she said. "I see you quite understand what a hopeless nurse I should make! I can't help feeling it is fortunate for my husband that he does not like to have me in his room when he is ill."

She laughed slightly and very musically, and then glanced round at the clock on the mantelpiece.

"You said he was asleep, I think?" she said, just a touch of concern returning to the half negligence, half dignity of her tone. "You will wait, perhaps, for the medicine from Alnchester before you go back to him?"

"Thank you," returned North Branston. "Yes. It will be better not to run the risk of disturbing him before the man comes back."

He spoke rather mechanically, and a certain distinctly nonplussed expression produced by her reception of his covert sarcasm remained unchanged. She pointed him to a chair with a careless gesture, and sat down in the low, wide arm-chair from which she had risen on his entrance.

North Branston seated himself in silence.

There was a pause. Lady Karslake leaned back, her hands clasped tightly together on her knee, looking

contemplatively before her. North Branston was adjusting his ideas. The process, presumably, was hardly completed when his hostess turned her head in his direction, and said suddenly,—

“Are you a native of Alnchester?”

North moved abruptly, and brought his deep-set eyes to bear, as circumstances demanded, on her face. He answered the characteristically direct question as concisely as it was asked.

“No!” he said. “But I have lived there since I was five years old.”

She looked at him for a moment, her grey eyes very critical and full of an easy penetration.

“Ah!” she ejaculated. “Now what advantages you men have! If you had been a girl, what an unspeakable destiny those words would convey!”

She laughed, looking at him with a tacit claim on his comprehension, a tacit assurance that he must agree with her; and almost in spite of himself North Branston smiled sardonically.

“Male advantages have their limits, unfortunately,” he returned.

Her eyebrows moved quickly, and she paused a moment.

“You are a much-to-be-pitied section of society, you men,” she said, with a light, half-mocking note in her voice. In the perfect security of that womanliness which invested her without effort, with a dignity which seemed as inalienable a part of her as her speech or her gesture, she was as careless in her graciousness as only unassailable dominion can be. “But consider! A girl in your position would probably not only have lived in Alnchester; she would have grown there! She would have developed there—save the mark! She would have gone on little visits now and then, I suppose, or she would have gone to a little school, perhaps. And she

would have come back to Alnchester as to the centre of the universe. Now you—" she glanced at him again, "you—have not grown in Alnchester, I presume?"

"No!" he answered; his tone was grimly responsive. "I have not had that proud privilege! I'm afraid you don't think much of Alnchester?"

She laughed lightly and waved her hand expressively.

"On the contrary," she said, "I think a great deal of it! I have never seen a place the society of which gave me so much to ponder. I have been trying to decide whether there is any one essential quality necessary for social intercourse, and if so, what it is? I used to think that mutual amusement was the idea, but I know now that that is a fallacy. The Alnchester people don't amuse one another; they don't appear to wish to amuse one another; they don't appear to wish to be amused! Why do they ever meet?"

"To discuss one another," suggested North, as a man humours something too confident and, though he may not acknowledge the fact, too charming to be repressed.

"Have you never seen a cathedral town before, Lady Karslake?"

Lady Karslake shook her head.

"Never," she said. "I've lived in London and Paris, and I know something of Vienna, but I've never made the acquaintance of an Alnchester until now."

"I am afraid you will find Hatherleigh rather dull," said North; he was watching her face now with a look on his face in marked contrast to its usual indifference, and with a little satirical twist about his mouth.

Her eyes flashed with a smile.

"No," she said easily. "I've never been dull—not even on a yacht. It must be a dreadful state of things. Something or some one always amuses me—or I amuse myself. Do you find Alnchester dull?"

She was looking at him with a smile, but her eyes held a certain comprehension which had grown in them as they talked. And North Branston, meeting them, answered almost without knowing it.

"Perhaps I do," he said. "A little."

CHAPTER VIII.

"TELL him to come up at once—at once, Adelaide! I don't understand it at all! See that he comes directly, if you please!"

The words were uttered by Dr. Vallotson from his bed; uttered with the utmost fussiness and self-importance, and with all the irritability of an invalid whose placidity has been disturbed at too early an hour. It was eight o'clock in the morning. Three minutes earlier the sound of a dog-cart stopping at the garden gate had elicited an interested and cogitatory exclamation from Dr. Vallotson, who was not sufficiently recovered to leave his bed before the afternoon; almost before that ejaculation had passed his lips his wife had stepped brusquely to the window, and raised the blind. No word had come from her, however, until a tentative inquiry was uttered by her husband. Then she had announced briefly that the arrival was North Branston. The news, coupled with the fact that North Branston had not returned from Hatherleigh Grange by twelve o'clock on the previous night, immediately led Dr. Vallotson to the conclusion that his substitute had passed the night with his patient; and the idea had thrown him into a state of testy excitement, the outcome of which was the above peremptory summons to his partner.

Mrs. Vallotson was still standing by the window.

She had dropped the blind, but she was standing with her eyes fixed as though she could still see out. She did not move even when Dr. Vallotson finished speaking ; a second or two passed, and he was beginning to fidget restlessly, when she turned and walked across the room. Eight o'clock was the breakfast hour in the Vallotson household, and she was ready to go downstairs. Though Dr. Vallotson could not see it, her lips moved as if she answered him ; but no sound came. He took her departure for assent, and she left the room in silence. She went downstairs almost mechanically, and at the foot of the stairs she stopped abruptly. For a moment she stood there, one hand gripping the balusters, and then she went on into the dining-room. Constance was there, alone.

"Good morning, mother," the girl began. Then, as she came close to her mother, she stopped involuntarily. "I'm afraid you've had a bad night?" she asked.

Mrs. Vallotson kissed the soft round cheek presented to her hurriedly, barely touching it with her lips.

"No," she said, "nothing of the kind, child." Her voice was hoarse and rough, and she paused a moment as though its tones struck harshly even on her own ears. "Go and tell North that your father wants him at once," she said. "Tell him to go straight up."

And as Constance obeyed, her mother sat down, heavily and as if perforce, in the chair by which she stood at the head of the table.

Constance's inference as to her mother's night was by no means unnatural. Mrs. Vallotson's hard red colouring was blurred and patchy, her lips were white and cracked. Her eyes were hollow ; they were surrounded by reddened circles and shaded by heavy eyelids such as only total want of sleep produces ; and their keenness was dull and strained. She sat in her place,

staring straight before her without a movement of any kind, until the door opened to admit Constance. Then she stirred suddenly, and began to make the tea.

"North has been out all night, hasn't he?" said Constance, rather resentfully, as she seated herself. "He looks very tired, certainly, but he need not be so exceedingly taciturn, I do think, mother!"

There was no answer; and Constance, glancing at her mother, decided that some annoyance or other connected with North lay at the bottom of her demeanour. She came to this conclusion without surprise and with some unconscious satisfaction. It seemed so entirely the right thing that a person who remained so oblivious of her superior qualities as did North, should be in the wrong in every direction. She digested her dignified reflections for a few moments in silence, and then she began to make conversation. Constance always made conversation; she considered silence a sign of intellectual poverty.

But on this occasion she found it almost impossible to get her conversation under way. As a rule, in her duologues with her mother she found herself encouraged—if not assisted—by a series of comments and responses which, even if she considered them not always worthy of her remarks, were a token of interest which she involuntarily respected. This morning such comments were altogether lacking. Breakfast went on, and still the mother and daughter were alone together. North did not appear, and by-and-by, in spite of Constance's efforts, silences began to occur; silences which made her feel strangely uncomfortable. It was in the midst of one of these silences that Mrs. Vallotson started suddenly to her feet.

"It is quite time your father had his breakfast," she said. "Give me his tray, Constance!"

Before she had finished speaking, she had moved round the table, and with her one available hand was rapidly collecting the necessary items.

"Toast, Constance!" she said impatiently. "That's right! Now open the door for me! Be quick, child!"

"But won't you let me take it, mother? Or let me ring for Mary, as usual. You can't manage——"

A peremptory gesture from Mrs. Vallotson silenced the girl. Constance opened the door, and Mrs. Vallotson went out of the room.

Mrs. Vallotson went upstairs, but she opened a door which led, not into the bed-room, but into the dressing-room adjoining it.

"I won't tolerate it, I tell you! It's a piece of confounded impertinence, such as only—only—a jackanapes could perpetrate! Once and for all, I will not tolerate it!"

The words, evidently the conclusion of a lengthy tirade, came to Mrs. Vallotson's ears through the opening that led into the bed-room, even as she closed the door softly behind her; the voice was Dr. Vallotson's, but it was so high and tremulous with incontrollable passion as to be hardly recognizable. Mrs. Vallotson stood motionless, drawn back against the wall, so that her figure was invisible from the room beyond—into which she for her part could not see—holding her tray mechanically; the patches of colour in her face standing out against their livid background, her eyes strained and eager.

A moment's pause followed Dr. Vallotson's words; then North Branston's voice reached the dressing-room. It was hard with immovable self-control.

"The point at issue is not one that can be paltered with," he said. "The man's life is at stake. Treated on your original diagnosis the actual disease would run its course unhindered, and we should lose the case in twelve

hours. I have told you what I have detected, and the treatment I intend to adopt."

Mrs. Vallotson's clutch upon the tray tightened ; her bloodless lips moved slightly as though she tried to moisten them. But for those signs of life she might have been a marble statue of attention rather than a woman.

"What you have detected!" broke out Dr. Vallotson's voice, almost choked with wrath. "What you chose to assert, sir—that's what it is! Anything to set yourself up above your elders! Anything to feed your own confounded arrogance and conceit! Anything——"

"Anything to procure myself the pleasure of an interview like this! If the case were not an exceedingly interesting one, I should have greatly preferred to let it go!"

There was a dangerous note of rising contempt in the young man's voice, and it seemed to touch Dr. Vallotson's wrath—founded, as it seemed, on wounded self-importance—into yet greater extremes.

"Interesting!" he ejaculated. "Interesting! Do you imagine for one moment, sir, that if things were as you assert them to be, you could pull the man through? Does your conceit induce you to believe that you will succeed where better men than you fail ninety-nine times out of a hundred? I ask you, do you believe it?"

"I propose to try!"

The retort came sharp and short, ringing with defiance, strength, and resolution. Mrs. Vallotson moved suddenly. A wholly indescribable flash of expression leaped up in her eyes: she crossed the dressing-room with swift steps, and entered the bedroom.

Dr. Vallotson was lying—or rather almost sitting up—in bed, his face pink with passion, and his hands trembling. Facing him, but standing at some little distance,

was North Branston. Not even the intense purpose of its set could soften the bitter lines which stood out about his mouth. He had been up all night with Sir William Karlake, and his eyes were haggard.

As Mrs. Vallotson entered both men turned involuntarily towards her. A brief, conventional greeting came mechanically from North Branston, but she did not even glance in his direction. She passed him, and went up to her husband, who had received her with an inarticulate ejaculation which seemed to demand recognition for, and participation in, his indignation.

"It is time you had your breakfast, Robert," she said. "The things can't be kept hot all the morning."

She placed the tray by his side as she spoke, and he waved it away with a gesture as grandiloquent as his recumbent position would allow.

"I cannot take any breakfast, Adelaide," he said, with choking dignity. "I have been too seriously annoyed—I may say insulted. It may be long before I can recover myself."

"I am the offender, of course, Adelaide," said North Branston. The previous scene had evidently shaken his self-control, for his sardonic tones were rather reckless. "I have had the misfortune to differ materially from Dr. Vallotson on a professional matter, and to be obliged to tell him so—a less common occurrence! Don't keep any lunch for me; I shall have a busy day."

Mrs. Vallotson had not looked at him as he spoke; had never paused, indeed, in the arrangements she was making on Dr. Vallotson's breakfast tray. But, as he finished, she turned and faced him. She looked at him for an instant with an accentuation of an expression which had lurked in her eyes more than once, as they rested on him, during the last few days:—as though she

saw him from a vast distance which dwarfed into insignificance the ordinary antagonism of their relations.

"Sir William Karslake is very ill?" she said.

"Yes," answered North curtly. And he turned on his heel and left the room.

To all those members of the household who came in contact with Dr. Vallotson, and whose temper or spirits were capable of being affected by his mental condition, the day that followed was a day of trial. As far as could be judged, it seemed more than likely that his prophetic utterance would be justified, and that it would be long indeed before he recovered himself. Dr. Vallotson had received hard treatment at the hands of fate. To have to relinquish to North Branston a patient of such social standing as Sir William Karslake, was in itself a trial. But the result ensuing on that relinquishment was hardly to be borne. North Branston had told him briefly that his diagnosis of the case was mistaken; and that the man in whom he had detected no organic disease was lying at the point of death. The younger man had further given him a concise sketch of the treatment he proposed to adopt, without consultation with himself, and in direct opposition to his methods; and had proved impervious alike to denunciation and invective. Dr. Vallotson's self-love smarted and writhed in every nerve; impotent indignation stretched him on the rack.

Alone with his wife, his sufferings expressed themselves in an incessant recapitulation of the circumstances of the case, involving an unending vituperation of North. With other members of his household who could not be thus confided in, he relieved himself by such an exhibition of irritability and pompous self-assertion as made his very neighbourhood a terror to the servants, and sent his daughter out of his room twice in the course

of the morning with wrinkled forehead, elevated chin, and temper which did slight credit to her philosophy.

But Constance, as the morning passed into afternoon, became vaguely conscious that the gloom which hung about the house ; the gloom which was producing in her a state of irritable depression such as she had hardly ever known before ; emanated, not from her father's condition, but from her mother. Mrs. Vallotson had gone about her household duties as usual ; she had ordered, supervised, and attended to Dr. Vallotson's comfort, precisely after her usual fashion. But it seemed to Constance that she had not uttered one unnecessary word. There was a concentration about her, an intense absorption, from which the girl held herself instinctively aloof.

The afternoon was not half over, and Constance's spirits and temper had reached a point much nearer to a state of collapse than she would have believed possible. It was wet and cold, and a constitutional being out of the question, Mrs. Vallotson had supplied her with some needlework ; Mrs. Vallotson herself was reading aloud a book of travels in a mechanical, monotonous voice ; and her husband, thus denied the relief of speech, was fidgeting irritably, when the front door bell rang, Mrs. Vallotson read on unheeding, until a moment or two later the door was opened by a servant. The trio were sitting in Dr. Vallotson's study.

"Mr. Armitage is in the drawing-room, if you please, ma'am !"

"Mr. Armitage," echoed Dr. Vallotson testily. "Bryan Armitage ! What the deuce does he want ? These boys have too many holidays. Suppose you send him word you are engaged with me, my dear ? Or let Constance go and amuse him ! Yes, yes, that will be the best way ! Let Constance go !"

Constance was already folding up her work.

"He won't stay long, mother," she said, with matter-of-fact composure. "I'll tell him you're busy."

Mrs. Vallotson signed assent, her eyes returning to her book, and Constance went out of the room.

Her head was held distinctly higher than usual as she went along the passage to the drawing-room, and her nose was aggressively tilted. She had by no means forgotten the circumstance under which she had last parted from Bryan Armitage. But for three days Constance had spoken to no one outside her own home circle, and the vivacity in her eyes seemed to suggest that with true philosophic tolerance she was prepared to find even an encounter with an offender better than no communion with her kind at all.

Bryan Armitage rose precipitately as she opened the door, and came eagerly towards her.

"How are you, Connie?" he said. "I hope I'm not an awful nuisance for calling, but I—I wanted to know how Dr. Vallotson is?"

Constance shook hands with lofty dignity.

"He is better, thank you," she said. "My own impression is that if he would only try to control his temper he would be a great deal better."

This revelation of feeling—for such it was, in spite of the majestic deliberation with which it was uttered—seemed to encourage Bryan. He followed her example and sat down, saying cheerily,—

"Oh, well, you know he's got the gout, and we all know what that means. I expect to have it some day myself; it's in the family."

He paused, and glanced at her with an inquiring flash in his blue eyes. Constance was sitting contemplating the fire with an air of the deepest and most intelligent interest; her small person was very erect, and her very

consciousness of her visitor's presence seemed to be an act of distant politeness. The severity of her demeanour seemed to invite or even to demand apology, and in so doing to suggest a possible placability behind. Bryan Armitage had arrived at a fortunate moment.

"Dr. Vallotson's illness has kept you at home a great deal," he began ; "you and Mrs. Vallotson. I've looked out for you everywhere, Connie."

"Yes ?" she said. She spoke with the absent civility of one whose soul is filled with higher matters.

"I've wanted to see you, you know, awfully. That's really what I've come for to-day, Con. I say, I'll apologize anyhow you like ! It's really beastly of me to have offended you ; I'm no end cut up about it !"

Constance turned her head and regarded him as though he were a very small boy, and she the personification of the dignity and wisdom of age.

"You've not offended me !" she said. "You evidently don't understand my mind, Bryan ! It is a sign of inferiority to be what you call 'offended.' But I must say that it has pained me much to see how exceedingly narrow you have allowed your intelligence to become, and how hopelessly out of date are your ideas."

Bryan crossed his legs and settled himself comfortably in his chair, resting his head so that his shrewd, twinkling eyes could watch her face.

"That's a bad look-out !" he said cheerfully. "My ideas about spheres, for instance, I suppose you mean ? I'm not chaffing," he added hastily, as Constance's chin lifted itself ominously, and a flush appeared upon her cheeks. "Upon my word I'm not, Connie. I really do want to get at what you mean."

She paused a moment, looking at him dubiously. Then apparently convinced by the sincerity of his eyes,

into which a shade of genuine anxiety had crept, she said, authoritatively,—

"It's extremely simple! If you had kept in the least abreast of the times, you would know without being told. However, I will do my best to explain myself." She paused, a little contemplative frown wrinkling her forehead. She was evidently considering how the subject in hand could best be brought within the limits of his comprehension. "I suppose, Bryan," she began, "that even you are not so densely ignorant as not to know that to-day belongs to woman?"

The last word, as she pronounced it, was spelt with a capital letter of only slightly more colossal proportions than those of the first letter of the previous substantive. She paused for a reply, but only an inarticulate murmur came from Bryan Armitage. His face was an odd mixture of gravity and apprehension, just touched with an irrepressible sense of humour. Constance, whose question had been a mere matter of form admitting of no denial, continued. "Of course it follows," she said, "that with woman, as a matter of fact, rests the solution of all the problems of the day. Now, I dare say you may have heard—in fact, you must have done so, whether you know it or not, because it's in the air—that the great problem of the day is the social problem. Oh dear, no, Bryan, not socialism"—this in a tone of impatient disdain, in answer to a murmur from her listener. "Socialism is only part of the labour question. It's a mere phase. No, the social problem—the relations between the sexes, and all that they involve."

The words had come from her lips as calmly and as glibly as though they were a phrase of ordinary everyday life, and she looked at him as she spoke with the dogmatic, supercilious self-assurance of the clever schoolgirl. They brought Bryan Armitage up from his reclin-

ing attitude with a scarlet visage of horror, and an ejaculation which, though again inarticulate, was by no means murmured.

Constance looked at him with eyes of pitying disdain.

"You are dreadfully out of date, Bryan!" she said. "My dear boy, the time has come when these things must be faced boldly by men and women side by side. The time has come when men and women must work together for a new era."

"But you don't intend to talk like this—you don't mean, Connie—Good heavens, you don't propose to be the inaugurator of a new era in Alnchester?"

"Yes, I do!" returned Constance calmly; she had met the horrified incredulity of his incoherent speech with a smile. "By a new era, I mean an era of intelligent comprehension. Don't distress yourself, Bryan. Of course I shall do nothing violently or in a hurry—nothing that would startle or annoy my mother, for instance. I have a very great respect for my mother, though of course she belongs to the old order. She is one of those women who were brought up to think it improper to know anything. I shall just prepare the ground and feel my way, and do what is possible by the force of personal influence and example until I have become a power!"

"Oh, good Lord!" groaned Bryan, rumpling his hair with an agonized gesture. "Oh, Connie!"

"I have a plan which I mean to put in motion," she continued, "as soon as ever I am a little better known and have grown popular. And I think you may perhaps be useful to me, Bryan. I intend to establish a club for both sexes—a club where they can meet in a rational way, and see the literature of the day—of course we shall have to select it at first—and talk things over. I intend—"

But Constance's further intentions were not destined

to verbal development at that particular moment. Her words were cut short by the opening of the door, and Bryan Armitage, with the bewildered dismay about him of a man who is only half awakened from a nightmare, stumbled to his feet as Mrs. Vallotson entered the room.

"How do you do?" he said. "I'm very sorry—I mean I'm delighted to hear that Dr. Vallotson is better. What delightful weather!"

The afternoon was closing in torrents of rain, but Mrs. Vallotson did not seem to notice anything confused about the young man's speech.

"He is much better, thank you," she said. "Constance, ring the bell. He is coming in here to have tea."

"I'm no end sorry I can't stay!" said Bryan, with unabated confusion. "I really must go. Good-bye!"

Mrs. Vallotson made no effort to detain him.

He shook hands with Constance in a great hurry, and disappeared.

Whether the little interlude had quickened her sense of contrast, or whether the gloom that fell upon the house with his departure was really heavier than that which had preceded it, Constance did not ask herself. She only realized, as she poured out tea for her querulous father and her taciturn mother, that there was something in the atmosphere, metaphorically speaking, which was hardly to be endured. She had plenty of time to analyze that something—though analysis failed utterly to reduce it to its elements. Afternoon passed into evening, and still she and her parents were alone together. North did not come in.

Dinner-time arrived, and still he did not return.

The dinner was passed by Dr. Vallotson—who rejoined his family in the dining-room for the first time—in one long and vituperative colloquy with himself as to how and where the young man could possibly be occupied ; a

colloquy the ever-recurring burden of which was a surmise to the effect that North was engaged in "making a fool of himself" at Hatherleigh Grange, and that Sir William Karslake was fulfilling his—Dr. Vallotson's—prediction by dying incontinently in his doctor's hands. From the beginning of the meal to the end Mrs. Vallotson sat in absolute silence.

It was not until the trio had been re-established in the drawing-room for nearly half an hour, that the opening of the front door was heard.

On a peremptory word from her father, Constance rose and went to the drawing-room door.

"North," she called, "father wants you."

She came back to her chair, and a moment later North Branston stood in the doorway.

Dr. Vallotson wheeled round his chair with a movement which provoked from him a groan of pain.

"Where the deuce have you been, sir?" he demanded angrily. "You've not been in since nine o'clock this morning!"

"So I am very well aware," said North drily. "I have just come from Hatherleigh."

"And how's your patient, may I ask, sir? Dead?"

"No," was the brief answer. "He is still alive!"

CHAPTER IX.

SIR WILLIAM KARSLAKE was still alive ; but death stood at his bedside, and with that grim power North Branston closed in a hand-to-hand struggle. Day after day rose to find the object of the combat still hovering on that borderland which lies so close to, and yet so infinitely remote from, the life of every day. Day after day passed ; and the advantage was now with one, now with the other, of the combatants. The shadow of a great suspense lay over Hatherleigh Grange. All the afternoon long, carriages stopped at the lodge gates with polite inquiries and condolences from every direction. But Lady Karslake saw nobody ; the only visitor from the outside world who crossed the threshold in those days was North Branston.

North Branston grew haggard and worn ; the case was a somewhat rare crisis, upon the obscurity of which modern medical science had only recently thrown light. In modern methods—so modern, indeed, as to retain something of the nature of experiment—lay his only chance of success, and his professional enthusiasm was strung up to its intensest pitch. And not only were his mental faculties kept constantly at full stretch. To fit a six mile drive into his round of work twice or even three times in the twenty-four hours ; to spend sometimes an hour, sometimes considerably more, in one visit to a single patient, involved a concentration of his other work which told heavily on his physical forces. Leisure and

rest became empty words for him. His meals were uncertain in everything except the haste with which they were eaten ; and the quantity of sleep he achieved he himself best knew.

It was generally understood in Dr. Vallotson's household that Sir William Karlake's critical condition created a considerable amount of extra work. But—because constant oral statements make more impression upon the unobservant than unannounced fact—an impression prevailed that it was upon Dr. Vallotson's own shoulders that this extra work fell.

After North Branston's attendance at Hatherleigh had been going on for three days, Dr. Vallotson announced that it was imperatively necessary that he himself should put his own sufferings on one side and attend to the practice.

"Somebody must attend to it, my dear," he assured his wife pompously ; " old Mr. Bronson and Mrs. Jones have not been seen for a week. I must go out to-morrow."

The words were spoken in a tone of heroic self-immolation, but the reasons against his going out on the morrow existed solely in his own imagination. He was perfectly restored to health. His gouty foot had regained its normal proportions, though he still elected to clothe it in a boot of portentous size. During the days which followed, Dr. Vallotson seemed little less incessantly employed than was North Branston himself. He was in and out of the house a dozen times a day ; the family hours had to be incessantly rearranged that he might " fit in his work ;" and North Branston was kept in a constant state of irritation by the difficulty in securing horses for his own use.

"Do you expect me to do my work on foot, sir," demanded Dr. Vallotson, his small figure dilating with

indignant self-importance when North, with the angry urgency of over-pressure, pointed out the difficulties thus thrown in the way, "with my foot in its present condition? Where would you be, I should like to know, if I should have to lie up again? You must arrange your engagements to fit in with mine; that's all I can say."

The current of vigorous movement which was stirring the men of the household had apparently touched Mrs. Vallotson and Constance also. It was as though the cloud which had hung about the house during Dr. Vallotson's illness had broken up into strong electrical disturbances, and by the force of reaction the stillness and monotony of these days had given place to an activity which was their very antithesis.

No longer confined to the house by her husband's demands on her attention, Mrs. Vallotson had thrown herself with almost restless energy into the task of re-introducing Constance to her friends. Day after day she went about with Constance, paying calls, giving and accepting invitations, fulfilling all the engagements that the social life of Alnchester could provide. Day after day saw her with never an unoccupied moment, never a solitary half-hour.

To Constance the change came just at the psychological moment. A few days more of unrelieved domesticity, and eruptions of a more or less natural and unphilosophic character must have ensued. She threw herself into the movement which obviated this disastrous contingency with the vigour of one who sees the first steps to a great end plainly before her. To "go about" was the necessary preliminary to popularity, and popularity was the necessary preliminary to the inauguration of a new era for Alnchester.

That popularity might linger; that she might go about without exciting any conspicuous interest in the

Alnchester breast ; was a contingency that had not occurred to Alnchester's would-be regenerator. To be received everywhere with a few kindly but absent-minded words, and then to find herself relegated to a subordinate position before one all-absorbing topic of public interest, was by no means what she was prepared for. Graver forebodings as to the nature of the Alnchester intellect than she had hitherto allowed herself to indulge began to fill her mind. Apprehensions such as she had hitherto put aside from her as altogether too degrading to the human race began to give her gloomy moments. And the contempt with which she regarded the topic which thus pre-occupied Alnchester knew no bounds. Some slight expression of her feelings became at last imperative to her.

"I suppose it's quite impossible," she said, "for anyone in Alnchester to take an interest in more than one subject at a time. But it makes conversation rather monotonous, mother, don't you think? We've paid three calls this afternoon, and we've talked about nothing but Sir William Karslake and his illness."

Ten days had passed ; it was about four o'clock in the afternoon, and Constance and her mother were on their way to pay their fourth and final call for the afternoon. It was growing dusk, and Constance could not see her mother's face as Mrs. Vallotson replied,—

"You will probably talk of nothing else at the Bennetts, either ; so you'd better make up your mind to it, Constance. Everybody is very much interested in Sir William Karslake."

The statement accurately represented the condition of affairs. Hatherleigh Grange was one of the great places of the neighbourhood, and it had stood empty for nearly a year. "New people" at the Grange would in any case have excited a considerable amount of curiosity. That Sir William Karslake's name was one known in a larger

world than that of Alnchester rendered it of no moment whatever, so long as he remained at a distance. But when he became Alnchester property, so to speak, the fact quickened attention as adding lustre to the city. By falling ill with the eyes of the world thus fixed upon him, Sir William Karslake had reached the apex of public interest.

It was with a little impatient sigh that Constance followed her mother into Mrs. Bennett's drawing-room—Mrs. Bennett was the wife of a clerical neighbour—and even as they were received by their hostess, the girl heard the name that was becoming so obnoxious to her, proceeding from a corner of the room where two ladies sat together in such earnest conclave that they could hardly break it off to shake hands with Mrs. Vallotson and her daughter. The conventional greeting was hardly uttered when the younger of these two ladies, a sharp, sallow-faced woman, turned from Constance to Mrs. Vallotson and said eagerly,—

“Now I dare say you can tell us, Mrs. Vallotson ; your husband was an old friend of Sir William Karslake's, I understand, and he would know, of course. Did he—Sir William Karslake, I mean—go out to India in 'sixty or 'sixty-two ? ”

Mrs. Vallotson seated herself deliberately, and unloosed her mantle at the throat.

“You seem to have been misinformed, Miss Goode,” she said composedly. “My husband only met Sir William Karslake in the course of the last three weeks, and that only in a professional capacity.”

Miss Goode's face fell.

“You don't say so ! ” she said. “Well, really now, that's very odd. How things do get about, to be sure ! I do assure you that Dr. Vallotson himself—now who was it told me that Dr. Vallotson had told them—what was it they said he'd said ? ”

Miss Goode became temporarily lost in the mazes of her memory, which was, indeed, somewhat overstored with sayings which had been repeated to her. And the word was taken up by Mrs. Bennett, a round, comfortable person, the salt of whose life was gossip.

"But you know of him, Mrs. Vallotson?" she said cheerily. "I dare say you know of him, though you haven't known him personally. They say he was a great anxiety to his father in his young days. Sadly wild, I've heard."

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Vallotson. She spoke with a dry indifference, which made Constance mentally congratulate herself on having a mother so superior to the other mothers of Alnchester. And since topics of conversation were more or less subject to the dictation of the doctor's wife, a slight pause ensued. Mrs. Bennett produced a little commonplace from the Alnchester stock, which Mrs. Vallotson received with hard civility. But as far as the other two ladies were concerned, it fell flat. Mrs. Bennett herself was but half-hearted in her support of it, and after a few minutes of lame conversation another pause ensued. It was broken this time by the lady who had been discussing the subject of the hour with Miss Goode when Mrs. Vallotson and her daughter appeared upon the scene. She was a limp lady, with a large and helpless countenance.

"Perhaps Mrs. Vallotson can tell us, at least," she suggested feebly, "how the poor man is to-day—Sir William Karslake, you know. I was told that they expected a crisis of some sort to-day. I was told that somebody said he would be either dead or out of danger before to-night."

"A doctor's wife is the last person in the world who can give any information as to the condition of his patients," said Mrs. Vallotson.

She rose as she spoke to take leave.

"I assure you, Mrs. Elliott, I know no more on the subject than you do."

A passing wonder crossed Constance's mind, as to how it was that her mother knew even so much of Sir William Karslake's condition as her words seemed to imply. Some testy words of Dr. Vallotson's had put Constance herself into possession of the fact which Mrs. Elliott had stated with so much melancholy satisfaction and foreboding. And it had annoyed the girl more than once during the afternoon, to feel that she herself was not wholly untouched by the prevailing epidemic, inasmuch as she found herself dwelling now and again on the thought of the crisis that was coming and going, while the man who was passing through it was being gossiped about and discussed. But she knew that her mother had not heard Dr. Vallotson's words; she knew that she never inquired after any of the patients. And she had supposed that her mother knew nothing of what the day held for the inmates of Hatherleigh Grange.

It was late when they left Mrs. Bennett's house, but to-night Mrs. Vallotson seemed to be in no hurry to get home. She walked slowly, and when they had nearly reached their own house, a small piece of shopping that she wanted to do occurred to her, and she went back to the town—making Constance accompany her—to accomplish it. It added half an hour's walk to an afternoon that had already contained a good deal of exercise; and when they finally turned into their own road again for the second time, Constance was tired out. Her mother must be very strong, she thought to herself, to show no sign whatever of fatigue. Mrs. Vallotson was walking slowly, it was true, but it was with the dilatoriness of a woman who is in no haste to reach home and rest. To Constance, upon whose nerves the idea of Sir William

Karslake and the crisis which she knew must now be over, either for good or ill, had rather fastened, the very tardiness of her mother's step was an added weariness. North would be back from Hatherleigh by this time, the girl said to herself, and she really would like to know—though it was very foolish of her, she told herself—whether the stupid man were alive or dead.

She followed her mother quickly into the hall.

"It's late, Constance," said her mother. "Go and get ready quickly, or you'll be late for dinner."

Constance hesitated for an instant. There was a ring of command in Mrs. Vallotson's voice, and habit prevailed over desire. After all she could hardly have explained her wish to see North Branston, which was, indeed, shrivelling into nothingness now that it was possible to gratify it.

"Very well, mother," she said, and she turned and went away up the stairs.

Mrs. Vallotson stood at the foot, and watched her out of sight. Then she, too, turned and went down the passage towards North Branston's consulting-room. The door was ajar; and as she drew nearer North Branston's voice became audible—North Branston's voice, confident, satisfied, elated, as it had never sounded in that house before.

"He'll do," he said. "There's no fear now. It couldn't have gone better. But, by Jove! Vallotson, six hours ago I thought I was beaten."

Mrs. Vallotson had stopped suddenly. She put out one hand towards the wall of the passage as if to steady herself. Then she turned, and retraced her steps. She went up the stairs to her own room, and shut the door.

CHAPTER X.

"WHERE is my mother, Sarah?"

It was about ten o'clock on a bright, frosty November morning three weeks later. Constance had come leisurely out of her room, dressed for walking, and had addressed the question to the housemaid.

"Mistress is in the store-room, miss," was the answer.

With that air of unhurried serenity pervading her small person, which is the result of a consciously judicious portioning out of time to philosophic ends, Constance pursued her way downstairs. She went on to the back premises, and pushed open a half-closed door.

"I'm going now, mother," she said.

It was a large room, lighted only by one small and heavily barred window; and in spite of the scrupulous cleanliness and neatness of all its arrangements, it struck chill and gloomy by comparison with the brightness of the passage, along which the winter sunshine lay in ruddy bars. Occupied with the contents of one of the cupboards, stood Mrs. Vallotson, alone. She turned her head slowly as Constance spoke.

"Very well," she said. "To the Bryanstones, is it?"

There was a subtle suggestion about Mrs. Vallotson's voice which is only to be described as a suggestion of disuse; it was like a voice influenced by long intervals of total silence. Its tone, however, was not one calculated to arrest the attention of the inaugurator of a new era.

Constance did not come into the room. She stood in the doorway, her girlish, daintily dressed figure, as it caught some of the sunshine behind her, contrasting sharply with the sombre stillness of the room before her.

"No, mother," she said; "to the Eliotts. I'm going for a walk with Kitty, and then we are going to read together. I'm going to tea with the Bryanstones this afternoon. I told you of the engagement two days ago."

There was a strong touch of the condescension of the instructor in the clear young voice, as Constance uttered her explanation; her last words were, further, just tinged with a certain lofty consciousness of her mother's forgetfulness; and the deference which would have subdued the whole, three weeks before, was only very faintly represented. The tone was the outcome of the independence to which the girl's words witnessed.

That independence was a development of the past three weeks, which had seemed to the future regenerator of Alnchester so perfectly desirable and natural, that it never occurred to her to consider that it had come about with rather untrustworthy rapidity.

Mrs. Vallotson had apparently fulfilled all the social duties demanded of her for the present, and her energy in that direction seemed to have been followed by a reaction in which she was even disinclined for society; but she had placed no obstacles in the way of any visits to her contemporaries, which Constance liked to pay by herself. She seemed, on the contrary, desirous that the girl should go out. Constance went out accordingly with assiduity, preparing her ground over afternoon teas, country walks, and German readings; and winning a half-unwilling, half-admiring recognition from the girls, who thought her "dreadfully clever."

There was a moment's pause now before Mrs. Vallotson

answered her. Then she said briefly, "Very well!" and turned back to her cupboard.

"Good-bye, mother," said the girl brightly.

"Good-bye, child."

Mrs. Vallotson did not turn round. She was counting table-linen, and she continued her work in the same mechanically concentrated manner after her daughter had gone.

Another hour had passed when she came out of the store-room, locking the door behind her, and went into the dining-room. She was looking cold and numb, but she seemed to be hardly conscious of the fact, for she did not approach the fire. She seated herself by the table, and took some needlework from a basket.

It had been remarked on more than one occasion lately—remarked with some unconscious satisfaction by those female friends who had been wont secretly to consider that the well set-up and well-preserved Mrs. Vallotson looked too young for her years—that the doctor's wife was ageing. She seemed, indeed, to have taken one of those strides forward by which some women advance in life. She had become very thin; her tall figure had lost its mature substantiality, and had become gaunt; wrinkles had developed about her eyes, and her eyes themselves had a sunken appearance; her hair, hitherto untouched by the hand of time, was growing grey about the temples—growing grey and greyer, as it seemed, from day to day. Sitting there now in the quiet, dull dining-room, with the winter daylight full on her face, the pinched, blue look of cold about her seemed to accentuate all these signs of age, and she looked in her sombre stillness like a woman twenty years her senior.

Nearly two hours had gone by, and except for the mechanical movement of her fingers she had hardly stirred, when the door opened. She glanced up

instinctively. The new-comer was North Branston, and as her eyes fell upon him, an added shade of stillness fell upon her face. She looked back at her work in silence.

North Branston was looking rather pre-occupied, and all the more disagreeable characteristics of his ordinary expression seemed to be in abeyance for the time being. He walked up to the fireplace, and stood with his back to it, looking down thoughtfully at the carpet. Mrs. Vallotson worked on without a word.

"Adelaide!" he began. He spoke abruptly, but it was the abruptness of constraint rather than antagonism. "You came to a decision a few weeks ago rather prematurely."

Mrs. Vallotson's fingers continued to move slowly but unceasingly, and there was a perceptible pause before she said,—

"What do you mean?"

North Branston changed his position. He folded his arms and leaned his shoulder against a corner of the mantelpiece.

"As to calling on the Karslakes," he said. "I dare say your principle as to the country people is all right in itself. I don't profess to understand these things. But I don't see the necessity for going out of your way to be uncivil."

He paused, but Mrs. Vallotson did not speak, and after a minute he resumed in a voice touched—involuntarily, apparently—with its customary dry antagonism,—

"I suppose it is considered uncivil when one woman expresses a wish to make the acquaintance of another woman, and that other woman—there being nothing against it but her own will—declines to take the necessary step! At any rate, Adelaide, I think it right that you should know that Lady Karlake has more than once expressed a hope that you will call upon her."

He made his simple masculine deduction and uttered his bold statement, with a man's total absence of comprehension of the social compulsion they contained. They had evidently been for him rather a declaration than an argument.

"Is Sir William Karslake quite well again?"

The words came from Mrs. Vallotson abruptly, and she looked up for the first time.

"He has quite recovered from his late attack."

"Does he go out?"

"He will go out if the weather keeps dry—yes."

North's replies had been uttered drily and grimly. He paused a moment after uttering his last sentence, his brow darkening. Then he said abruptly,—

"Of course there is no more that I can say on the subject. I shan't attempt to argue the point. I've told you how the facts stand, and it's for you to decide upon your course of action. I shan't be in until dinner-time."

He strode across the room as he spoke, and disappeared.

When Mrs. Vallotson sat down to lunch with her husband and daughter, the numbed look of cold had passed away from her face, and with it there seemed to have gone something of that set repression which had settled upon her features so gradually as to be unnoticeable. Her colouring was deeper than it had been for days. She spoke little throughout the meal, but that little was sharp, and to the point. Luncheon was nearly over when she said abruptly,—

"Where is North this afternoon, Robert?"

"Where is North?" returned Dr. Vallotson. "He has gone out to Arlcote. He is going to take Royston and Petershill on his way back. If he had listened to me, he would have gone to Hatherleigh. Very in-

attentive, I consider him ! Very inattentive. Did you want the carriage, may I ask, my love ? ”

“ Yes ! ” said Mrs. Vallotson slowly. “ Can I have it ? ”

Dr. Vallotson pursed up his lips and pondered importantly.

“ Well,” he said, “ I really hardly know what to say ! It isn’t—I must own that it’s rather inconvenient this—where did you—now where were you thinking of going, my dear ? ”

“ I want to go to Hatherleigh, to call on Lady Karslake.”

Dr. Vallotson drew himself back in his chair with a movement which was almost a jump of delight, and the pompous uncertainty of his expression melted in an instant into a boundless satisfaction.

“ To Hatherleigh ? ” he said. “ My love, to be sure ! At what time, now—at what time shall I tell James to be ready ? To call on Lady Karslake ? Quite so. Quite so. And Connie is going with you, of course ? Quite so.”

He uttered the last words in a tone of radiant and condescending comprehension as of a man who sees and deigns to recognize a scheme perfect at all points. As he spoke them Constance looked up quickly, but before she could speak Mrs. Vallotson said decidedly, and rather harshly,—

“ No, Constance is not going.” She stopped, and then added, addressing the girl but not looking at her : “ You’ve got something to do this afternoon, haven’t you, child ? ”

“ I’m going to tea with the Bryanstones, mother.”

“ The Bryanstones ? ” began Dr. Vallotson, fussily. “ Surely the Bryanstones can be put off, my dear. Surely you had better—”

“ There is no reason why they should be put off.” Mrs. Vallotson had risen, and her tone was conclusive. “ Tell James to be ready at half-past three, Robert.”

CHAPTER XI.

It was an unwritten canon among the subordinate members of Dr. Vallotson's household that the mistress of the house always looked very well "when she was dressed." The substantially handsome garments which she was wont to don when she visited were, in particular, considered by her kitchen critics to "set her off" with conspicuous effect; and the parlour-maid, who had, of course, considerable opportunities of forming an opinion, and who was moreover a native of Alnchester, was in the habit of clinching her approving comments with the assertion that there was no lady in the town, or in the precincts either, who "dressed handsomer."

Both the parlour-maid in question, and the coachman, felt themselves established afresh in these opinions as Mrs. Vallotson, who had come downstairs punctually at half-past three, went out to the brougham that afternoon. The woman saw at one glance that her mistress had "all her best things on." The man privately reiterated his conviction that she was "a wonderful fine figure of a woman, with a precious sight more stuff in her than any of the young ones!" So impressed was he by the characteristic in his mistress which he thus vaguely defined, that he could not refrain from an appreciative look at her as she stood some half an hour later before the door of Hatherleigh Grange.

As a matter of course, the Alnchester shops, exclu-

sively, were patronized by the doctor's wife, and her patronage was considered a very desirable honour. It was well understood that nothing but the very best would do for Mrs. Vallotson ; the term comprehending all that was most thoroughly genuine in material, all that was most substantial and imposing in cut and decoration, and ignoring utterly such trifles as taste and new fashion. Her tall figure, clad now on these lines, in what their vendor had characterized as "excessively handsome" winter garments, no longer showed gaunt. It was drawn up to its full height, and there was a suggestion of force about its vigorous outlines which seemed to invest her with a singular dignity, not of repose or breeding, but of innate, self-conscious power. Her lips were slightly compressed, and her eyes glittered.

"Is Lady Karslake at home?"

"Yes, madam."

It struck the man that the question had been asked with a peremptoriness which hardly besemed a visitor who obviously possessed no footman, but he led the way across the hall with the impassiveness of a machine.

"What name, madam?"

The answer rang as peremptorily as her question had done,—

"Mrs. Vallotson."

The next moment a door was flung open, and the name was repeated with that absolute inexpressiveness of which, perhaps, only a footman is capable.

It was a large room, warmed by two bright fires at opposite ends, and lighted by three long windows which faced the door and looked out over gardens and a park. It was one of those rooms which are so large that the furniture is necessarily so disposed that each separate arrangement of chairs, sofas, and tables is complete in

itself; and which only the most perfect taste can preserve from either over-crowding and over-decoration, or an alternative bareness. In this instance an absolutely harmonious result had been obtained. No aggressively distinct impression, either as to colour or style, was conveyed. There were quantities of flowers and ferns about, but even these were not obtrusive, and were rather noticeable in the general effect produced than in detail. The room had only one occupant. About the fireplace at the end of the room farthest from the door, there was a peculiarly comfortable and dainty little arrangement of furniture, backed by a beautiful screen. In a large, low chair thus protected, leaning idly back with a book on her knee, was Lady Karslake.

She turned her head quickly as the footman spoke, and rose with a graceful impulsive movement, moving a few steps forward—a slender, delicately-dressed figure—to receive her visitor. There was a little smile of half-amused curiosity coming and going in her eyes, and it changed into an almost mischievous flash of perception and anticipation as she held out her hand.

“I am delighted to make your acquaintance!” she said; she spoke with a cordiality of manner which sat delightfully upon her. “It is very kind of you to come and see me, Mrs. Vallotson!”

For an instant there was a very singular and perfectly perceptible pause. Mrs. Vallotson had taken the hand held out to hers, and she was still holding it—mechanically, as it seemed—as she looked straight into her hostess’s face. There was so strange an expression in her eyes—could Lady Karslake have seen it in the gathering dusk—so full, piercing, and assured was their gaze; that for that instant, even confronted with the easy dignity of the woman whose hand she held, the rough power with which the doctor’s wife was instinct

asserted itself as absolute haughtiness, and she and her hostess stood on an equality.

The next moment Mrs. Vallotson had dropped Lady Karlake's hand, and dropped it brusquely.

"I am very happy to call," she said.

"You must have found it cold driving?" said Lady Karlake. "Will you take this chair—near the fire? How bright it has been, though!"

"It is hardly colder than we must expect at this time of year," responded Mrs. Vallotson tersely.

She had taken the chair indicated by her hostess, and was sitting erect and uncompromising. Her dignity was about her still, but compared with the manner and bearing of her hostess it showed now chill and stiff.

Lady Karlake smiled and accepted the response with a careless, courteous gesture. The servants were bringing in lamps, and she was sitting in a flood of soft pinkish light as she scanned her visitor's face with a half delighted shrewdness in her own. She did not pursue the subject of the weather.

"It is a very pretty drive from Alnchester in the summer, they tell me," she observed. "You know it well, of course? You must be very fond of Alnchester, Mrs. Vallotson, I am sure."

"I do not know that I have ever thought about it. It is a pleasant place to live in, and I am accustomed to it. That is the principal thing, in my opinion."

The friendly cordiality of Lady Karlake's tone had produced not the faintest perceptible effect on Mrs. Vallotson's demeanour, and the tiniest flash of expression contracted her hostess's eyebrows. The footman had placed a little tea-table by her side, and she turned and began to pour out tea with quick, deft movements.

"You have lived here a great many years, I think?"

she said. "Dr. Branston—you will let me give you some tea?"

She had half risen with a cup in her hand, and Mrs. Vallotson stopped her abruptly.

"None, thank you!" she said decidedly.

Lady Karlake sat down again with a little laugh; there was rather a wilful ring in it.

"None?" she said. "How sad! Afternoon tea seems to me the one thing that makes life in the country endurable. It breaks up the afternoon. I tell my husband that he only lives for tea-time. He always comes in for a cup."

"Indeed!"

The word was polite, but it was icy; and Lady Karlake, glancing across at her visitor's immovable face, leaned back in her chair.

"I was just going to say something about Dr. Branston!" she said. "I can't remember what it was, but I should very much like to tell you, if I may, how much my husband has appreciated his skill and care during his illness. We can never forget how much we owe to him."

The words were very perfectly spoken, with a gracious wifely dignity which made them indescribably charming. But not a muscle of Mrs. Vallotson's face moved. Her colour seemed to have faded slightly as she answered, in the same inexpressive voice,—

"I believe he is considered clever. I am glad you have been satisfied."

With a graceful movement as of impatience or annoyance, Lady Karlake lifted herself from her easy attitude. Then, as though to cover the movement, she rose and said, with a little laugh,—

"They can't have told my husband. I will ring. It will give him great pleasure—"

She was interrupted. With a sharp movement, evidently as involuntary as the gesture with which she stretched out one hand as if to command silence, Mrs. Vallotson had turned her head.

"That's North's voice," she said.

There was a sound of voices outside as she stopped with a strange, breathless catch in her voice—and she half rose from her seat.

Lady Karslake glanced down at her with a flash of surprise.

"How quick of you!" she said. "Yes, it does sound like Dr. Branston, doesn't it? I suppose he has been to see my husband, and is coming in to have some tea."

The voices came nearer as she spoke, a touch fell on the handle of the door, and Mrs. Vallotson sat slowly down again on her chair; slowly and stiffly like a woman made of stone.

"Have you come for a cup of tea, Dr. Branston?" said Lady Karslake as the door opened. She held out her hand to North Branston as he came across the room to her, with an easy cordiality of greeting which witnessed, as did the tone of her voice, to the intercourse of the past weeks. "I have a visitor, you see. William," she added, "I want to introduce you to Mrs. Vallotson."

Sir William Karslake had followed North Branston into the room. Even when weighted by the heavy disabilities of weakness and pain, his conspicuous personal advantages and his dignity of manner had been by no means overlaid; seen now in comparative health, he was a singularly striking-looking man. He was a tall man, as has been said, but it was not from his height that his presence derived its dignity. There was about him that air of perfect breeding which is in part an affair of birth, in part of the circumstances of life; and it was

coupled with that which gives it a supreme charm—a suggestion of mental power, and of the habit of command. Sir William Karslake had made a great success of life. He stood at the head of his own line in the diplomatic service, and he had been for many years one of the most courted men in the Indian Empire. Socially, also, the ball of life had been at his feet. And there were characteristics about his face which suggested that in the latter case, as in the former, his dominance had been the result of deliberate calculation. His features were admirable, and life had impressed upon them that charm of stateliness which makes a man handsomer in middle age than youth can ever be ; but there were lines about it faintly suggestive of sarcastic possibilities, and his eyes were cold and expressionless. Neither in his step nor in his carriage were there any traces of the invalid, but his illness had left its mark on him nevertheless. His features were almost painfully sharply chiselled, and there were deep hollows about his eyes.

He quickened his steps slightly, on Lady Karslake's words, with a courteous gesture of satisfaction, and came up to where Mrs. Vallotson sat.

"May I have the pleasure of introducing my husband, Mrs. Vallotson?"

There was the faintest touch of surprise in Lady Karslake's voice. Mrs. Vallotson had neither moved nor spoken as Sir William Karslake approached her. As Lady Karslake, however, spoke she rose slowly. Her figure was drawn up to its full height ; her head was lifted and slightly thrown back ; and her eyes were almost on a level with those of the man before her as she looked full into his face and held out her hand.

"I am very happy!" she said.

Sir William Karslake had taken her hand, and bowed

over it in the courtly manner which was habitual with him. Then he looked in due course into her face. There was no pause, even of the most imperceptible nature, before he spoke ; not a muscle of his face seemed to have moved ; and yet in that brief second his eyes had altered slightly. An intent expression had developed in them, as of a clear-headed man who finds himself suddenly disturbed by a shadowy association of ideas too dim and too fleeting to be either accurately defined or traced to any source.

"I am delighted to have the opportunity !" he said. "Branston"—this over his shoulder to North in the same suave, well-modulated tone—"why did you not tell us that we were to have the pleasure of seeing Mrs. Vallotson ? "

"I am not a seer, unfortunately," returned North. The surprise with which he had acknowledged Mrs. Vallotson's presence had vanished, and he smiled grimly as he spoke. "I could not tell you what I did not know myself."

"You'll have some tea, Dr. Branston ? "

North turned to Lady Karslake, who had seated herself again by the tea-table, and took a low chair near her.

"Thanks," he said. "I will."

At the same moment Sir William Karslake seated himself by Mrs. Vallotson.

"I am a great admirer of your fine old city, Mrs. Vallotson !" he said courteously ; the words, indeed, were more courteous than truthful, and represented the speaker's sense of a conversational necessity rather than any actual fact. "No doubt it presents to me, as a new-comer, picturesque points which are over-familiar to its inhabitants. But probably the balance is struck for the Alnchester people by what I may perhaps call the pride of ownership."

He smiled suavely as he finished, but the smile did not touch his eyes. They were scanning Mrs. Vallotson's profile half furtively, as though almost without their owner's consciousness.

Mrs. Vallotson paused a moment, almost as though she felt his scrutiny and permitted it. Her own face was set like a rock, and her very lips were colourless.

"We do not admire the old part of the city," she said. "But all the newer parts have been greatly improved during the past twenty years."

"Quite so!" was the courteous reply.

An absent, preoccupied tone had come into Sir William Karslake's voice. Mrs. Vallotson had not turned her face away again, nor had her eyes left him; and the furtive glance with which he had regarded her was becoming almost a stare.

Neither of the two turned, or even seemed to be aware of any movement about them, when Lady Karslake and North Branston, who had been talking easily together on the other side of the great fireplace, rose, and strolled to the other end of the room to look at a picture of which they had been speaking.

"Quite so!" repeated Sir William Karslake vaguely. "You—have lived in Alnchester all your life, I believe?"

His voice was suave still, but it was the suavity of habit, mechanical, constrained, and rather ghastly. He was still staring straight into her face, and there was a moment's dead silence.

Then Mrs. Vallotson's white lips moved. She moistened them, involuntarily as it seemed, and with her eyes still holding his, she said in a low voice, the absolute calmness of which was almost horribly unnatural,—

"You think you know me! You are mistaken."

The speech was no answer to the words he had spoken. His question died between them, utterly ignored by both man and woman in the presence of something unspoken which had risen between them.

Slowly, as she spoke, all that was indefinite and suppressed in Sir William Karslake's expression developed; every line of his face seemed to become petrified; recognition, blank uncompromising recognition, was stamped lividly on every feature, and stared from his eyes. He did not speak; the muscles about his mouth stood out strong and distinct. They sat there by the fire staring each at the other, and from the other end of the room came the murmur of the voices of Lady Karslake and North Branston. They were differing over the picture.

Mrs. Vallotson paused as though to let her words sink into his consciousness. Then she repeated them. The two pairs of eyes held one another as if fascinated; held one another, it might have been, in the strength of the terrible, slowly-growing repulsion common to both.

"You are mistaken. You do not know me. You understand? I am not the person for whom you take me!"

She had spoken very slowly, uttering each word with deliberate emphasis, though her voice was low. And as slowly as she had spoken he answered her, endorsing her words as it were in a hard, strained tone,—

"I am mistaken! You are not—the person for whom I take you."

They faced each other for a moment more, and then Sir William Karslake moved abruptly, and the rigidity of his face broke up. He motioned almost fiercely to where North stood at the other end of the room.

"Who—is that?" he said hoarsely.

To her face too there came a desperate flash of expression ; a sudden defiance stirred her every feature.

"My brother," she said.

Sir William Karlake's hands were trembling convulsively ; he clenched one of them violently round the arm of his chair. He was looking at her again, and his eyes were fierce and searching.

"You had no brother !" he said. He spoke, for the first time, rapidly and unevenly. "You had no—"

Their eyes met once more.

A moment later Mrs. Vallotson had risen, and was moving down the room to Lady Karlake.

"I have paid you a long call," she said, in a voice from which every particle of expression was eliminated. "I must say good-bye."

"We shall meet again before long, I hope ? " returned Lady Karlake lightly.

She shook hands as she spoke, and Mrs. Vallotson paused. Then, without looking at him, she addressed North Branston.

"You are coming, North ? " she said.

He signed assent, shook hands with Lady Karlake, and followed her.

CHAPTER XII.

A REIGN of terror dominated high and low alike, and the dictator was a woman's temper. A fierce restlessness seemed to possess Mrs. Vallotson, driving her into an incessant, almost defiant, activity. And some jar or strain upon her nerves seemed so to operate, that all her energy, to whatever end directed, flowed in a channel of unending fault-finding. Hard, unyielding, and domineering as she was invariably, no one in Dr. Vallotson's house had ever experienced such treatment at her hands as they met with now. Her temper seemed almost beyond her control. Her asperity and irritability were only a shade less to be deprecated than the violent anger into which she would break on the slightest provocation—sometimes on no provocation whatever. Careful manager and house-proud woman as she was, her rule was too strong and too capable to involve, under ordinary circumstances, that incessant nagging pre-occupation which those qualities sometimes carry with them. But now her hand was heavy on the domestic arrangements from morning to night, and the servants were consumed with nervous terror. Constance alone was ever spared, and her mother encouraged her visits in the town and her own occupations restlessly, and almost harshly. For Dr. Vallotson there was no mercy. Nothing he did, and nothing he said, found favour in his wife's eyes during these days. He went

softly in his wife's presence, compensating himself by a double measure of pompous self-assertion and ill-temper in her absence.

But for North Branston was the hottest of the fire. The antipathy which haunted their relations seemed to stand out in bitter relief, and at the same time to have somewhat changed its character; there was something singularly impersonal about it. There were times during the fortnight that followed their meeting at Hatherleigh Grange, when her tone to him became such that even her husband would interpose feebly and timidly on the younger man's behalf—times when North Branston would rise and leave the room abruptly, white to the very lips.

Nearly a fortnight had passed. A morning during which the restless acerbity of Mrs. Vallotson's temper had been even more pronounced than usual, had worn itself away, and Mrs. Vallotson was alone in the drawing-room. Her solitude was of her own creating. She had peremptorily insisted on Constance's acceptance of a casual invitation to lunch in the town. And she was seated at her writing-table, adding up tradesmen's books with a fierce keenness of expression which was strangely disproportionate to her occupation.

The door opened, and she lifted her head and turned round sharply.

It was Dr. Vallotson who stood upon the threshold, and his appearance as he hesitated there, holding on to the door-handle, presented a mixture of uneasy deprecation and irrepressible self-importance. His figure was drawn up to rather more than his natural height, his face was pink with excitement; but his lips were pursed up, and his eyes sought his wife's face with involuntary uncertainty. He held a letter in his hand.

"My dear," he began ingratiatingly. "Adelaide, my

love, I should not wish to disturb you, but something of so really—really—” he hesitated and coughed as though unable to decide upon the word—“really remarkable a nature has occurred that I should like you to hear of it.”

Mrs. Vallotson laid down her pen and turned further round in her chair, thus facing her husband.

“What is it?” she said harshly.

“A groom came over from Hatherleigh Grange this morning—you may have seen the man, my dear?”

“Yes!”

“Exactly! He brought a letter from Sir William Karlake to me. I will not say, Adelaide, that its contents surprised me. After all, they point to a very natural feeling on Sir William’s part. But they were wholly unexpected. He expresses his desire to be attended for the future by me, and not by Branston.”

Dr. Vallotson was standing on the hearthrug by this time, his hands behind his back, his every muscle absolutely stiff with pompous self-importance, and a moment’s dead silence followed.

Mrs. Vallotson was staring at the carpet.

“To be attended for the future by you and not by—” She had spoken in a harsh mechanical voice, and she stopped abruptly.

“By me, my dear! Yes! You may like to see Sir William’s letter, perhaps? Very gracefully put, very! I brought it in on purpose, thinking that you might like to look at it.”

He handed her, as he spoke, the letter he held. His wife opened it, and read it in silence.

It was very brief, though it was worded with perfect courtesy; and it was very cold. It conveyed to Dr. Vallotson the writer’s feeling that he would prefer to be attended, now that Dr. Vallotson himself was happily

recovered, by the senior partner of the firm, as being an older man, and in some measure his—the writer's—contemporary. It expressed the writer's sense of the skill and attention shown him by the junior partner, Dr. Branston, during his late illness; and it was signed "William Archibald Karlake."

"Very civil, my dear, is it not? And very natural, of course—very natural indeed!"

Dr. Vallotson had been fidgeting restlessly for some seconds. Time enough had elapsed for the mastering of the brief sentences several times over, and Mrs. Vallotson had neither moved nor spoken. Her eyes were still fixed upon the paper in her hand. She did not lift them now as she answered,—

"Yes!"

"It is not quite the customary thing to do—not in a partnership of this kind. I am well aware that Branston is far from considering himself my junior! But you see, Sir William has evidently considered him as such—very naturally, indeed! I assure you, Adelaide, when I read the letter, my first feeling was one of annoyance—very serious annoyance indeed. I feared that Branston must have made some mistake in the treatment, or must have shown himself inattentive in some way to offend Sir William. And no doubt, no doubt, there is some little personal dissatisfaction mixed up with it. I've told Branston again and again how greatly his manner is against him, and I've pointed out the fact once more in this connection."

"Does North know?"

Mrs. Vallotson lifted her head suddenly as she spoke.

"Yes, my dear, yes. He happened to be in my room when the note came, and I handed it to him at once."

"What did he say?"

Dr. Vallotson shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands with lofty reprobation.

"A little less indifference to people's opinion would greatly improve Branston, Adelaide!" he said, pompously. "His self-conceit is a most unfortunate trait. He said nothing."

"Nothing?"

"He handed me back the note in silence—actually in silence. I felt it incumbent upon me, I need not tell you, to ask him if there was any explanation other than the reason given in the letter. And thereupon he said, in that cold-blooded, incomprehensible way of his, that no other explanation seemed necessary! Quite true, of course! Quite true. But I cannot say he said it pleasantly. Thank you, my dear."

Dr. Vallotson held out his hand, as he spoke the last words, to reclaim Sir William Karlake's letter. His wife gave it him without a word, and a rather singular little silence ensued. Dr. Vallotson evidently expected some comment; but none was forthcoming. His lips were just parting to present some other aspect of the subject when the luncheon bell rang, and Mrs. Vallotson rose suddenly.

"There is the bell," she said.

Mrs. Vallotson went through the afternoon that followed in a taciturn fashion, marked by a grim strength of self-control which was the very antithesis of the fierce restlessness on which it followed. The servants reported to one another in breathless tones that their mistress seemed to be "settling down." And Constance, who spent the afternoon paying calls with her mother, was aware of a decidedly desirable change in the atmosphere. "Elderly people were so often distressingly uncertain in their temper," she had told herself more than once lately. She also became aware—but very vaguely,

since the smallest modicum of her attention alone was available for other than her own private and public-spirited plans—of a rather singular expression upon her mother's face, which made her look, as the girl said to herself, "ridiculously defiant."

"Is there anything the matter, mother?" she said at last.

The mother and daughter had just come upstairs together on reaching home, and Mrs. Vallotson turned to her daughter abruptly.

"No," she said. "Of course not. What should be the matter, child?" And then she went on composedly to her own room.

It was perhaps an hour later when Mrs. Vallotson came out of her room, ready for dinner, and went downstairs. She went along the passage to North Branston's room, and opened the door a few inches.

"North," she said. "Are you there? I want to speak to you."

There was a moment's pause, and then North Branston's voice answered her.

"Come in," it said.

She pushed open the door and entered the room. North had been in the act of replacing a pile of books on the shelves facing the door, and he stood where he was to receive her. He was looking harassed and worn, and indescribably dark and cynical.

"Well?" he said.

It was a trivial matter, as it appeared, connected with the health of one of the servants; a matter which she usually referred to her husband. North Branston answered her questions, and having disposed of the subject he waited, evidently expecting her to go.

But Mrs. Vallotson did not go. She came a little further into the room, resting one hand on the back of a chair, and looked at him.

"What is this I hear about you and Sir William Karslake?" she said. The words came abruptly, almost as though they were uttered under some sort of compulsion.

North Branston's face grew darker.

"I conclude that you have heard that he has dismissed me in favour of Dr. Vallotson," he said, with curt indifference.

"Have you any idea as to the reason?"

He turned to the bookcase and began to put away the books he held.

"I have not troubled to consider the question."

Mrs. Vallotson watched him for a moment; her eyes were riveted on him, but they seemed to see not North Branston, but something beyond him in which his personality was merged.

"You are not surprised!" she said. "Had you any reason to expect—this? You have seen Sir William Karslake, I suppose, since the afternoon when I called at Hatherleigh? Did he give you any reason to think that he disliked you?"

North Branston pursued his occupation deliberately and without pause.

"I am not surprised," he said, "because it is not worth while to be surprised. I saw Sir William Karslake three days ago, but he did not honour me with the confidence you suggest."

He placed the last book on the shelf and turned towards her. His face was set into worse lines than had ever marred it before.

"If there is nothing more you want to say, Adelaide," he said, "I have some writing to do before dinner."

She looked at him a moment more, and then she turned away.

CHAPTER XIII.

"OH, William, what a fluke ! I call that really maddening of you. What am I to do now, I should like to know?"

The billiard-room at Hatherleigh Grange was one of the pleasantest rooms in the house : it was comfortable, it was luxurious, and all its decorations and appointments harmonized, in a certain depth of colour and solidity of outline, with the masculine idea which it implied. Lady Karlake, resting both hands on her cue and contemplating the billiard-table with a half-laughing, half-reflective wrinkling of her brows, gave an irresistibly delightful note of contrast to the picture presented. She stood for a moment musing, her grey eyes brightening ; then she threw herself swiftly into position, every graceful line of her figure thrown into relief, and extricated herself from her difficulties by an astonishingly daring and skilful stroke.

She turned to her husband with a gay gesture of triumph.

"There," she said. "I shall beat you after all. Wasn't that good?"

Sir William Karlake was looking rather worn, and the lines about his nose and eyes seemed to be more deeply graven than usual. He had watched her stroke with a rather preoccupied look in his cold eyes. But he transferred his attention to her with courteous completeness as he answered,—

"Admirable! It was a thing that only a woman would have attempted."

There was a little satirical twist about his mouth as he spoke; and in his eyes, as he looked at her, there was a touch of satirical speculation. She turned away to the table with a quick, wilful gesture of laughing repudiation and defiance, and followed up her stroke with another as brilliant.

"My game!" she cried lightly, as she straightened her slender figure. "Aha, my friend, you see it's not so bad a thing to be a woman." She gave him her cue, smiling derisively into his face as she did so, strolled up to the fireplace and subsided into her favourite chair.

"It hasn't tired you, I hope, William?" she said, over her shoulder. The friendly indifference with which she spoke was curiously typical of her whole tone towards her husband; a tone of easy good-fellowship which neither gave nor desired anything beyond the mutual give and take of every-day companionship.

Her husband came towards her with a gesture of negation.

"Not in the least," he said, with rather chill courtesy.

Sir William Karslake had a rooted dislike, which he evinced tacitly but unmistakably, to any reference on his wife's part to the subject of his health.

He went up to a little table on which stood a tray with glasses, decanters, and aerated waters, poured out some whisky and seltzer-water, and then seated himself in a chair on the other side of the hearth to that which his wife occupied, and drew out his cigarette case.

"Where did you call this afternoon?" he said.

Lady Karslake stretched out one little pointed toe towards the fire and clasped her hands behind her head. She was looking very fresh and full of life; rather as though it were the beginning than the end of the day.

She was, indeed, a woman with whom—for all her dainty womanliness—it was impossible to associate any idea of physical weakness or fatigue. Like a finely-tempered instrument, her delicate organization seemed too admirably proportioned for fragility.

"This afternoon?" she said. "Oh, I went to the Howards at Sutton and the Howards at Sutton-Basing, and I did the Llanyons. And nothing of the faintest interest was done or said by any of those good people. Then I came home through Alnchester and did Mrs. Daintree!"—Mrs. Daintree was the Dean's wife. "William"—a mischievous laugh had come into Lady Karlslake's voice, and her eyes were dancing—"I am so glad you took this place. Alnchester simply delights me!"

"Really?" responded her husband. "I am charmed to hear it."

"I've no doubt," she went on, with a laugh, "that it will pall upon me after a time—I don't attempt to disguise that fact from myself. But at present I ask nothing more, when I need a little winding up, than to be allowed to pay a call in Alnchester. I have met only one inhabitant of Alnchester who is not convinced that Alnchester is the one truly habitable spot upon the earth's surface; that all the ways and works of that spot are the only right ways and works for all reasonable human beings, and that he himself is somehow or other a cynosure for all eyes—outside Alnchester—as being that pattern being, an Alnchester man. And oh dear me!" she added, with a low peal of laughter, "how sorry I am for that solitary inhabitant!"

"Do I know him?" said Sir William, absently.

His wife turned and looked at him with little smiles coming and going about her mouth and eyes.

"That is a question which shows how little you have

seen of Alnchester!" she remarked. "Yes, you do know him. The miserable being is Dr. Branston. By-the-bye, I went round by the place they're turning into this Cottage Hospital everyone talks so much about. I told him I should go and look at it. Rather a nice old place."

She paused. Sir William Karslake took his cigarette rather abruptly from between his lips, laid it in his ash-tray, and leaned back in his chair.

"I must confess," he said, "that your penetration surprises me. I have discovered nothing in Branston which differentiates him from his fellow-townsmen!" His slow, well-bred voice was very dry, and a trifle sarcastic.

His wife glanced at him with a quick change in her expression. Then she lifted her eyebrows with a little ironical movement and said carelessly,—

"Then I'm afraid I can't congratulate you! My dear William, the unfortunate man has that which would differentiate him from nine-tenths of his fellow-men anywhere—brains! Good heavens!" Her face changed again, and she laughed. "It's no wonder he is such a grim personage! He might as well live on a desert island, for all the sympathy that exists between himself and the people among whom he lives. Indeed"—she paused reflectively—"I think he would rather live on a desert island than in Alnchester! I was sorry for him from the first, but since I've seen his sister—oh, poor wretch, I consider his fate tragic! William, I assure you the recollection of that petrifying woman sometimes makes me laugh when I'm all by myself. You're being very extravagant with your cigarettes, William!"

Regardless of the not half-smoked cigarette which lay at his hand, her husband had opened his cigarette case again and was slowly and deliberately lighting a second.

He followed the direction of her eyes as she nodded smilingly towards the first, but he did not seem to see it, and he ignored her words.

"Does it?" he said drily. "You found her petrifying?"

"Petrifying! You had more of her than I did! What did you find her? I concluded that it was her gorgon-like presence that knocked you up for the evening after. By-the-bye, when is Dr. Branston coming here again? I was out when he came the other day, which was very stupid of him!"

Sir William Karslake did not move. Not even a muscle of his face stirred. He was holding a cigarette between his fingers, and he said quietly,—

"He is not coming again."

His wife glanced round at him quickly. Then she placidly drew in the little shoe which was getting too hot.

"Ah," she said, "that means you are out of the doctor's hands! Good news, you poor thing! But couldn't you keep Dr. Branston in attendance? He is interesting. I suppose we could hardly ask him to dinner without his belongings!"

"Hardly," assented her husband, with a certain ironical blandness of tone. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs.

"I have not quite conveyed the situation to you," he said, with rather elaborately deferential consideration. "I have written to Dr. Vallotson to-day to express my wish that he will attend me himself for the future. I prefer to have an older man than your friend Branston."

"You have written—William!"

Lady Karslake had lifted herself from her idle, reclining attitude with one swift, supple movement, and had turned so as to face her husband, one hand resting on

the back of her chair, her eyes open to their fullest extent, incredulity and amazement written on every line of her face. He made a slight gesture as in corroboration, and a little flush as of remonstrance swept into her cheeks.

"But what—what an extraordinary thing!" she said impetuously. "What a short-sighted thing! Dr. Branston has done wonders for you, hasn't he? The nurses said so."

Sir William Karlake just shrugged his shoulders; he knocked the ash from the end of his cigarette.

"He is clever, yes," he said drily. Then he turned slowly and fixed his eyes on his wife's face.

A strong indignation had flashed into her eyes, and her colour was coming and going almost as she breathed.

"I don't understand it!" she exclaimed impulsively. "After all the attention he has given, and all his interest—it seems so—so horribly ungrateful!" She paused, her brows contracted as if over a problem eminently distasteful and by no means to be solved. "You can't mean that you prefer that old humbug," she said. "You must have some better reason than that. What is it, William?"

There was a moment's silence. Sir William's face was perfectly composed, perfectly courteous, but there was a singular calculation in his cold eyes, fixed upon her face with an indescribable little smile in them. He looked like a man who, finding himself in something of a predicament, becomes aware of a means of self-extrication which appeals to a sarcastic sense of humour, and to a certain cold-blooded delight in cruel experiment, which is not unusual in a man of Sir William Karlake's type. At last he spoke, still watching his wife.

"Perhaps I have considered it wiser to dispense with Dr. Branston's services," he said.

"Wiser!" The exclamation was full of impatient incomprehension, and Lady Karlake's hand tapped the back of the chair impulsively as she uttered it. "My dear William, I suppose you do consider it wiser, or you wouldn't do such an extraordinary and ungracious thing. But why is it wiser? That is what I want to know. Why? Why? Why?"

The monosyllable was emphasized, each time it was spoken, by the slender, indignant hand on the chair, and the smile in her husband's eyes spread to the lines about his nose with very unpleasant effect.

"There are many things in this life," he said suavely, "that are better left unexpressed. Pardon my suggesting to you that if you realized the vehemence of your partisanship at this moment, you would hardly need to ask the question."

With a swift, sudden movement, Lady Karlake's brows contracted as though the drift of his words eluded her. Then, gradually, she seemed to understand him.

The hand upon the back of the chair clenched so fiercely that the rings must have cut into the delicate flesh. The flushed, spirited, protesting face paled to the lips, all play of expression dying on the instant into stillness, in one flash of indescribable amazement and measureless scorn. Her eyes dilated, and then contracted until they shone like two stars.

Fully a moment elapsed, and then Lady Karlake moved and spoke. She rose to her feet, and stood looking down upon her husband as he slowly lifted his cigarette to his lips.

"How dared you?" she said, in a low, vibrating voice.

And then she turned and left the room without another word.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE first words that Lady Karslake spoke the next morning contained a bidding to her maid to order her horse for ten o'clock. It was a perfect December morning, bright, frosty, and invigorating ; and from Lady Karslake's face, as she came downstairs in her habit and hat, every trace of the strong feeling of the night before had disappeared.

Its expression was not altogether normal, however. The laughing flash of her eyes was more frequent and more brilliant than usual, as though the sensitive temperament behind were rather unusually delicately strung.

The situation which she should take in serious earnest had never yet presented itself to Eve Karslake ; and in her own opinion, and in the opinion of those who knew her best, it never would or could so present itself. A sense of humour—even when it is that most perfect form, the complement and obverse of a sense of pathos—is a great preservative in either sex against any over-deep emotion. Couple a sense of humour in a woman with considerable mental capacity, and develop the combination in an atmosphere of absolute ease—entirely untouched by sorrow or struggle of any kind, personal or vicarious—and the result will naturally be the merest bowing acquaintance with strength of feeling.

Some such sequence of cause and effect had operated

with Lady Karslake. Life had been perfectly smooth with her ever since she became conscious of life ; it was smooth by circumstance, and it was smoothed further by the instinctive homage and consideration which her peculiar personal charm had never failed to win for her. She had known no family ties such as might have developed her affection. She had had innumerable offers of marriage before she was twenty, and a certain disdain for man's love, a holding cheap of what was thus lavished on her, was the inevitable result. Young men—the young men with whom she danced through her first London seasons—were the object of her lightest and most wholesale contempt. And when, during the fourth of these seasons, Sir William Karslake presented himself—a man of the world, a man with brains, a man who satisfied all her fastidious taste—she calmly ignored the thirty years that lay between them, and accepted him easily, almost indifferently. Whether he satisfied her so completely after four years of married life was a point on which she was hardly likely to be explicit, even with herself. But her wilfulness and her impulsiveness, traits which might have militated against married happiness, were an essential part of her charm in her husband's eyes, and he fostered them idly as a connoisseur fosters the delicate eccentricities of colour and form in the orchids of which he is proud. The disillusion, if any disillusionment there were, came from some cause quite other than any deliberate or conscious action on her husband's part ; some cause which she would have been absolutely unable to define to herself, even if she had ever cared to take the trouble. There were side-lights in her nature which her marriage had not taken into account.

It was those side-lights of her nature that were flashing and glowing this morning ; it was those side-lights which

had been touched into that vivid life with which her whole personality was instinct as she galloped her horse through the frosty air. Her husband had insulted her ; insulted her gratuitously. North Branston's close attendance at Hatherleigh Grange had necessarily involved a certain amount of intercourse with Lady Karslake ; and Lady Karslake, influenced by an interest and appreciation engendered by their first meeting, had willed, carelessly enough, to cultivate the young doctor's acquaintance. She realized his brain-power, and she took a humorous delight, just touched with sympathy, in his position as the cleverest man in Alnchester. His grimness entertained her, and she liked to talk to him. She had had no other companion who was to her taste during her sojourn at Hatherleigh ; her husband's illness had, indeed, isolated her almost entirely ; she had indulged her proclivity for North Branston's society, as she had indulged any whim that presented itself to her throughout her life, with the careless serenity that never conceives the possibility of contradiction or arraignment. To her delicate and lofty pride—so perfect as to be absolutely unconscious—no opening for such a suggestion as that made by Sir William Karslake on the previous evening had ever presented itself. That her husband, the man with whom she had spent four years, should be capable of so outraging every instinct of her nature, stung her to the quick.

At the moment she had realized the insult intensely. The intensity had died out of the position for her by the morning. Tragedy and melodrama were out of her line, and the *rôle* of offended wife struck her in a purely farcical light. But every delicate fibre was ajar and quivering with indignation. Her resentment might—and did—laugh ; but her whole consciousness tingled with it, nevertheless. It was inevitable under the cir-

cumstances that her indignation and resentment should tend involuntarily towards expression, and it was equally inevitable that the form taken by that expression should be dictated by the most wilful of contrary impulses.

She was on the brow of a slight hill about six miles from Hatherleigh when she drew rein, patting her horse's neck with the easy, affectionate touch of a good horse-woman, and glancing right and left over the country round. It was one of the prettiest districts about Alnchester, and seen under its present circumstances—the frosted trees sparkling in the sunshine, the winding river reflecting back the wintry blue of the sky—it looked its very best and brightest. And all its brightness, all its sparkle and light seemed to be reflected back into Lady Karslake's vivid face, as she sat and looked about her, and waited for her groom.

“Is there any road to Hatherleigh in that direction?” she said carelessly, lifting her whip and pointing. “I want to go back another way.”

Lady Karslake was adored by her servants, and the man's answer was as ready and interested as it was respectful.

“Yes, my lady! Those cross-roads there—a little to the right, my lady—one of those takes you to Hatherleigh, through Winchford. It's only about seven miles that way.”

The grey eyes glanced swiftly over the country thus indicated, and came back to the cross-roads; they strayed a little further, and then a sudden electric current seemed to pass through their owner, and they flashed into a spirited satisfaction; her lips parted and curved into a defiant, triumphant smile, she touched her horse lightly, and cantered down to the meeting of the roads. Then she drew rein, and waited for a horseman who was

coming slowly along the road from the opposite direction.

The sound of the groom's horse as he slowly followed, seemed to arrest the apparently preoccupied attention of the horseman as he drew nearer. He looked up and saw the slender figure sitting motionless at the cross-road. Instantly he put his horse to a quick trot, and was passing her with no other sign of recognition than that involved in a formal removal of his hat when Lady Karslake stopped him. It was North Branston.

"No, Dr. Branston," said Lady Karslake. "Not like that, if you please!" She spoke in a quick, laughing tone; but there was a ring in it which gave it an essentially authoritative character.

North Branston had brought his horse to a standstill, and turned towards her perforce on her first words; but every line of his figure expressed reluctance and constraint. His face had hardened as he caught sight of her into a set that was singularly dark and forbidding.

"Can I be of any service to you, Lady Karslake?" he said.

She met his eyes, and made a little comprehensive gesture with her whip.

"I don't choose to be cut," she said lightly. "Practically cut, that is to say. You were going at an eminently conversational pace when I caught sight of you first. Take it again, and we'll go on together. It's too cold to stand still."

She began to walk her horse slowly in the direction of Hatherleigh.

The first interview between them, on the night of Sir William Karslake's sudden seizure, had set for North Branston the keynote on which all his subsequent acquaintance with Lady Karslake had been developed. He had admired her then, without thinking of it; and his

admiration had increased without consciousness of its existence on his part. She had exercised some kind of fascination over him as a specimen of womanhood such as he had never before encountered ; and the spell of that fascination had grown stronger. But as he had, at the first, appraised her impulses and her sensitiveness somewhat cynically, so in their after intercourse he involuntarily set her imperious womanly waywardness in the forefront of such estimate of her as he unconsciously made, and his vague appreciation of her charm went hand in hand with a mental process which instinctively held her cheap. North Branston had never learned to respect woman. His organ of respect was, indeed, almost entirely undeveloped.

He had fallen, however, in the course of the last two months, into the almost involuntary habit of humouring her, and he did so now. He put his horse in motion, and moved on at her side.

"The cut does not originate with me. Lady Karslake," he said. "I presume you know how matters stand?"

She lifted her whip in quick token of assent.

"Yes, yes!" she cried crisply. "I know, of course. My husband has taken a step which I—regret very much." A kind of pale flash passed across her face, and she looked straight before her ; but she went on lightly and authoritatively. "But that is a professional matter ; I have nothing to do with you on professional lines, and decline to be implicated in professional doings."

She looked round at him, as she finished speaking ; but North Branston did not look at her. The set of his face did not relax.

"There is no separating the professional and the personal, Lady Karslake," he said. He spoke with a reserve which was eloquent of cynical bitterness. "Sir William Karslake has chosen to dismiss me from pro;

fessional attendance on him. Personal intercourse, as you will readily see, would be liable to moments of awkwardness under the circumstances."

Her eyes were still fixed on his, and quite suddenly the half-laughing, half-defiant excitement died out of her face. A flash of genuine indignation, of impulsive pity, sprang into her eyes and lit up every feature.

"Ah!" she cried, low and impetuously. "How angry you are! What a shame, what a shame it is!"

He turned sharply, almost checking his horse in the abruptness of the movement, and faced her with an angry flush mounting to his forehead. But as he met the undisguised, utterly unselfconscious sympathy of her look, the cynical words died upon his lips. He turned away and brought his whip down upon his horse's flank with a movement which made the animal bound forward. He checked it again; she gained his side in an instant, and they rode on together in silence.

After a minute or two North Branston spoke, in a low, still tone which told of strong feeling held rigorously in hand.

"I'm a fool to think twice of it!" he said. "A double-dyed fool to let it annoy me! I didn't know—" he paused abruptly and then resumed, "I didn't know that I had. What difference does it make?"

"It is such ungenerous treatment. Such a—such a horrid thing to do!"

The words came from Lady Karslake quick and impulsive, vibrating with the glow of that generous womanly sympathy which had so suddenly carried her away. She was entirely oblivious of the fact that it was her husband of whom she was speaking. Her tone seemed to penetrate to North Branston's consciousness. He turned his face towards her with a smile, and he spoke in a tone which, though it was sufficiently sardonic, was evidently intended to reassure her.

"Ungenerous treatment is only a phrase, after all," he said. "Unless one is sufficiently inexperienced to believe in its converse—and to expect it. I have grown past that elementary stage of existence, and take things as they come."

She glanced at him quickly. To take things as they came was her own undefined theory of life, but his tone touched her with a vague suggestion of another view of that notion which was so lightly familiar to her.

"That is very philosophical of you," she said. "It is my philosophy, too. I hope you find it work well."

He made no answer; indeed, her tone demanded none; and they rode on in silence. It was one of those pauses brought about between two people by the unconscious necessity for adjusting their ideas to a new stage in the development of their relations.

The silence was broken by Lady Karslake.

"Dr. Branston," she said impulsively, "why do you stay in Alnchester?"

North Branston started slightly at the sound of her voice, and turned towards her.

"Why do I stay in Alnchester?" he repeated vaguely.

"Yes. Why are you not in London? You are not the sort of man for this place. You ought to go away."

There was a direct interest, a genuine good-fellowship in her tone which deprived her imperious words of any possible suggestion of curiosity or intrusion. North Branston, meeting her eyes, paused a moment.

"Here I am," he said, rather as though he were humouring her by carrying on the subject she had started. "I don't find it worth while to consider why I am not somewhere else."

"You ought to consider it," she said imperiously. "You are very well aware that you are a clever man—too well aware of it for your good." She flashed a laughing,

defiant smile on him. What is the good of a clever man in Alnchester? What can he do? You ought to have ambitions."

"Ought I?" He was flicking his horse deliberately with his whip, and his eyes rested on her face with a curious expression in their sombre depths. "Rather unphilosophical, Lady Karlake. Don't you think they might interfere with the practice of taking things as they come?"

She looked at him for a moment in silence.

"You have ambitions," she said decidedly. "No, don't deny it—it's waste of time. Then why don't you use them? Is it laziness? No, you don't lead a lazy life."

"Thank you," responded North Branston coldly.

"Is it indifference? If so, you ought to rouse yourself and make an effort. Or is it pessimism?"

North Branston smiled sardonically.

"Have you ever heard the word necessity, Lady Karlake?" he said.

She was silent for a moment.

"Ah," she said slowly. "Necessity!"

The word was not a question, but North answered it as though it had been.

"I am in debt," he said, in a low, grating voice. "Dr. Vallotson is my creditor. I owe him such brains as I may possess. They were cultivated at his expense."

"Ah!" she said impulsively. "Ah, I see!"

There was a pause, during which the tread of their horses rang out clearly on the frosty air as they cantered along. Then she turned to him again.

"That is hard," she said gently.

The cynical lines were deep and set about North Branston's mouth as he returned her look.

"Your philosophy is rather skin-deep, is it not?" he said. "Why should you consider it hard?"

Her face changed suddenly into wilful, defiant challenge.

"My philosophy may not be perfect," she said, lightly, "but yours is no better, I'm quite sure! We'll argue the matter out another time. For the present, our roads are going to part directly."

In point of fact, a few yards further on the road forked; one branch leading to the little village of Hatherleigh; the other being the Alnchester road. And a moment or two later, she pulled up her horse and North Branston followed her example.

"Shall we meet this evening?" she asked carelessly. "Are you going to the concert?"

He hesitated a moment, and then he made a gesture of assent.

"Yes," he said. "I think so."

"Good!" she responded gaily. "Au revoir!"

She nodded to him, lifting her whip in a gesture of farewell, and cantered away towards Hatherleigh.

The concert to which Lady Karslake had referred was one given annually by the Alnchester choral society, and was an occasion of considerable importance in the Alnchester world. It was one of the occasions—eminently exciting from this very reason—when the unwritten law which separated the doings of the town from the doings of the precincts passed into abeyance. Everybody who was anybody in the precincts, and everybody who was anybody in the town—and a great many who were nobodies—went to the concert; and it was, moreover, one of the functions which were patronized by the county families.

North Branston's round that afternoon was a long one; and it was late when he reached Dr. Vallotson's house. As he hurriedly opened the front door and went into the hall, he met Mrs. Vallotson, who was coming downstairs.

Mrs. Vallotson was dressed for the concert; very handsomely and correctly dressed, according to Alnchester canons of taste, in dark-red velvet, made after the Alnchester reading of the term evening dress. The stern, defiant resolution which had attracted her daughter's attention on the previous day had settled so subtly into her expression that, though every line of her face was permeated by it, it was no longer noticeable except in the appearance of composed force which it gave her. And her whole effect was almost crudely strong and imposing.

She stopped as she saw North, her brows contracting involuntarily.

"You are not going to-night, I suppose?" she said.

"Yes," answered North briefly. "I am."

She paused a moment, and the set of her lips tightened.

"You must make haste, then," she said. "The carriage will be round at twenty minutes to eight."

Mrs. Vallotson had always made it clearly understood that she liked to be at the Town Hall on these occasions in good time, but not too early. She liked to make her entrance and proceed to her place in the best part of the hall when the place was sufficiently well filled to admit of her arrival making some little sensation, and she also liked to have some time for exchanging dignified greetings with her friends and commenting on other arrivals.

On this particular occasion the right moment was most happily hit upon. As she moved slowly up the room, followed by Constance and North—Dr. Vallotson had found that his hard day's work demanded an evening's repose—a murmur of recognition and respect rose here and there about the room, which was, perhaps, three parts full of Alnchester in evening dress and

suppressed excitement. And during the ten minutes that ensued her time was fully occupied in recognition and criticism.

The stream of arrivals had reached its flood and was rapidly thinning ; the amateur orchestra had presented itself upon the platform, and had been received with vociferous applause ; the first vigorous, if somewhat uncertain, notes of the overture were vibrating in the air when there was a little stir about the door, and up the room—quick, graceful, and self-possessed, in a soft green velvet cloak with some dark brown fur about it—came Lady Karslake. She had a girl with her ; a girl who was recognized about the room as “Miss Howard of Sutton.” She herself was not even known by sight to the majority of persons present, but though their own orchestra was thundering to them, every one in the room turned to look at her. She passed the Vallotson party with a little bow and a smile, and went on to her place further up and on the other side of the room.

And as if that charming little bow had exerted some magnetic influence over her, in Mrs. Vallotson’s face, as she returned it stiffly, all the suppressed, controlled resolution sprang into sudden fierce relief. The covert defiance that lurked so strangely in her eyes leaped up in a flash, and then sank down again, leaving her eyes harder than before.

Lady Karslake did not look again directly towards the Vallotson party until that quarter of an hour’s interval arrived, which was at least as dear to the heart of Alnchester as any of the musical efforts which preceded and followed it. Then she turned, caught Mrs. Vallotson’s eyes, smiled with a pantomimic expression of her admiration of the performances just concluded, and letting her eyes wander to North Branston, she smiled again and deliberately lifted her fan with a little beckon-

ing gesture. North Branston was standing up, surveying the scene about him cynically enough. He moved promptly and walked down the room to where she sat.

"Good evening," she said, "You don't look as though you were enjoying yourself. Sit down there"—pointing to a seat temporarily vacated by an enthusiast who had rushed to congratulate a performer—"and I will amuse you ! "

Mrs. Vallotson had necessarily seen the gesture with which Lady Karlake had summoned North, and she had watched his tacit response. Her conversation during the interval was as plentiful as the occasion demanded, but it did not contain one single word of approval of any one or anything, and the rigid set of her features never relaxed. She did not once glance towards the place where Lady Karlake and North sat together, but she seemed to know, nevertheless, when North rose to return to his own seat—the last moment of the interval having arrived—and she was waiting for him, so to speak, when he reached her. She looked up at him with the repulsion in her eyes singularly accentuated.

"Under the circumstances Lady Karlake would have shown better taste if she had contented herself with a civil bow to you ! " she said, in a quick, biting tone.

North Branston sat down in silence.

CHAPTER XV.

"DR. BRANSTON was there," said Lady Karslake to her husband, as she sat with him in the billiard-room for a few moments on her return home that night. "He was surveying the scene from a particularly scornful altitude ! I made him come and talk to me during the interval, hoping to reduce him to a more commonplace level."

She had turned her head lazily as it lay back against her chair, so that she looked full at her husband. She spoke with the utmost nonchalance ; but her eyes were less absolutely controlled than was her tongue, and there was a flash of proud defiance in them of which she was quite unconscious. Not the slightest reference had been made between the husband and wife, either in speech or manner, to the scene of the night before. Lady Karslake had met him luncheon—Sir William did not appear before midday—with that air of absolute oblivion of any possibility of discord which may be the supreme form of disdain. The indifference of her tone towards her husband was a trifle accentuated ; its easy friendliness was a trifle diminished—but that was all.

Sir William did not look at her as she spoke. The slightest suggestion of a cold and satirical little smile just touched the corners of his mouth. He had been lying back in his chair as he sat alone, his chin sunk upon his breast, gazing into the fire like a man who has surrendered himself to thought or memory ; thoughts or memories

gloomy and unpalatable to the last degree they should have been, judging from his face. But he had roused himself on his wife's entrance, and had given his most elaborately courteous attention to her account of the Alnchester concert. There was a hardly perceptible pause, now, before he said politely,—

"I hope you succeeded?"

His wife rose impatiently, and began to gather up the trifles she had scattered—fan, gloves, and so forth.

"Oh, pretty well!" she said languidly. "His social education has been neglected. I'm not sure that it hasn't helped to give him character."

Whether or no Lady Karlake's words were intended to suggest to her husband an intention on her part of supplying the defect in North Branston's education to which she had alluded, her subsequent proceedings seemed to point to the active carrying out of some such intention. North Branston seemed to have become the one man, in the little world in which she now moved, to whom it pleased her to talk, whose attention she condescended to exact. Wherever she met him she was sure to monopolize him, for a longer or shorter period, in a careless, self-assured, composed fashion which seemed to make the fact the simplest matter of course. She went about alone a great deal in these days; Sir William Karlake was called recovered, but it was an understood thing, that the chronic state of his health prevented his going into society. It was inevitable that in her husband's absence she should exact elsewhere those trivial male services without which a woman accustomed thereto can hardly exist; and it was apparently equally inevitable that those services should be rendered her by North Branston.

As a matter of fact, the cultivation of North Branston involved in these circumstances was Lady Karlake's self-

vindication from the insinuation by which her husband had outraged her. It was her protest to herself—and perhaps to him also—against the insult to which she had been subjected. If she had taken an idle pleasure in North Branston's society hitherto, it pleased her still better now that its enjoyment involved a tacit expression of that sensitive defiance and self-assertion with which she was alight.

It was a gratification which would, doubtless, have palled as the emotions which gave it flavour faded, had not her wayward impulse towards North Branston's society been reinforced by a certain stimulus that society gave her—though she realized the fact carelessly enough—in constantly exercising her brains and her curiosity. There were times when he created in her a vague perplexity ; a momentary sense of being somehow out of touch with him ; which she had never before experienced with any man—and the novel sensation kept their intercourse always fresh to her and preserved her interest as nothing else could have done. Their verbal contact struck out in her all kinds of unexpected lines of thought ; or rather of fancy and whim, for her ideas were seldom consecutive enough to be described as thought.

"I want to understand about this philosophy of yours," she said to him once. "Do you know I've not the faintest faith in it? I believe it's something quite different masquerading under a false name!"

The occasion was a dinner party at a country place about five miles from Alnchester ; he had come up to her in the conservatory after dinner as the merest matter of course, and stood leaning with folded arms against a pillar, apparently preferring to look down upon her from the vantage-ground which his position gave him.

"Do I ever pose as a philosopher?" he said, parrying her words.

"Certainly," she said promptly. "I wish you would sit down. You pose as a philosopher of the 'take things as they come' school."

"Very well," he said sardonically. "I don't mind owning it. The 'take things as they come' theory, as you call it, Lady Karlake, is about the only one going that will wash."

"It know it washes!" she said, with a little whimsical gesture. "It's my own theory, and it washes beautifully. But that is just where my doubt about you comes in. Now, it washes pink with me, a nice even pink; and it washes dark blue with you. From which I naturally infer," she concluded, with a low laugh, "that there is something wrong with your dye!"

He looked at her for a moment, with a smile just touching his lips.

"Has it occurred to you," he said quietly, "that the medium in which it is washed may have something to do with the result?"

"That's masculine for the soap and water, I suppose?" she returned gaily. "You shouldn't have plunged into an essentially feminine illustration. When we say a thing washes well, we mean that it defies the action of soap and water." She paused, unfurling her fan with a quick turn of her wrist. Then, as she used it slowly and gracefully, she went on in a meditative tone. "Of course," she said, fixing her eyes on him, "if you put a dark blue thing in, a dark blue thing will come out! I suppose that is what you do—but I don't call that taking things as they come."

"What do you call it, may I ask?"

"Taking things as they come," she pursued calmly, "involves a certain indifference, of course. But it must be a placid indifference. Things should be equally satisfactory to one—not equally unsatisfactory."

"And do you think that things are equally unsatisfactory to me?"

He asked the question in a low voice: slowly, almost dreamily, as though he were following her thought unconsciously, and without any deliberate volition.

"Are they not?"

Into her eyes as she asked the question there flashed one of those rare lights of almost magnetic sympathy, and he met them for a moment.

"Yes."

There was a brief silence. North Branston was absorbed in the stern introspect into which he had unconsciously drifted. Lady Karslake was thinking things over. At last her brows drew together in an unwonted pucker of thought.

"Dissatisfaction!" she said. "That is what it comes to, I suppose. Dissatisfaction is a thing I've never been able to understand. If things—circumstances and so on—are not to one's liking, one must adapt one's liking to one's circumstances. It's so much the easiest thing to do." She paused and looked up into his face. "And—is it worth while to do anything else?" she said gently.

He missed her meaning, though he felt the subtle change in her, and he answered without reserve.

"No," he said, "that's the point. Nothing is worth while. The whole thing is rotten to the core."

She shrank back, looking at him with disturbed, perplexed eyes.

"Ah," she said quickly, "I don't understand that." She shut her fan with a little snap, and a fresh wave of expression swept across her face, obliterating all its deeper lines. "Why go to the core?" she said gaily. "It's not in the least necessary. Perhaps there is no core."

It was such quick changes of humour as this, such sudden transition from sympathy to jesting, that made

his unreserve with her possible to North Branston. None of the stiffness or constraint which so often follows self-revelation almost unconscious at the time, ever touched him. He could expand under her magnetic influence, he could indulge almost without knowing it in the relief of self-expression ; and then a laugh, or a whimsical turning of the subject would put him back upon the mental pedestal from which he regarded her, with no more sense of having committed himself than if he had been talking to a child. Their intercourse brought a new note into his every-day life—a note of interest, variety, of positive pleasure ; a note which he sounded as often as might be with careless satisfaction. For him, as for Lady Karslake, circumstances had given a touch of extraneous stimulus to their intercourse. The treatment which he had received at the hands of the husband gave the wife's friendliness a peculiar meaning which was grateful to his self-respect—little as he realized it ; and there was a certain ignoring of Sir William in their relations which not unpleasantly materialized his sentiments.

North Branston's life had need of any such satisfaction as was to be found in friendship, for his domestic atmosphere at this time was heavily overcharged with trivial irritation. Moreover, Sir William Karslake's action had given Dr. Vallotson a handle over his partner of which he availed himself incessantly, to the utmost straining of their professional relations. It was a season of the year which invariably produced a fruitful source of jar and strain in the Christmas and New Year entertainments in the precincts and in some of the county houses round, to many of which North Branston was invited—though how the fact had arisen no one could have said—while the Vallotsons were not.

North rarely seemed to see Mrs. Vallotson in these days. But when they did meet she scarcely ever

recognized his presence. Perhaps the only spontaneous words she spoke to him from week's end to week's end were comprised in the question, with which she would turn suddenly to him after any of the dinner parties or dances before mentioned :

“ Was Lady Karslake there ? ”

Meanwhile, ignored by North Branston with a man's oblivion in such matters ; ignored by Lady Karslake with the supreme carelessness of a wilful woman ; the little world of Alnchester, lived and moved about them and had its being in gossip. Lady Karslake, as a new-comer ; and as a new-comer of a manner and appearance utterly at variance with Alnchester canons ; was naturally a good deal discussed in the little circle in which she visited ; and it was inevitable that in any description of her doings on any given public occasion the narrator should mention North Branston's name at least once. This fact was suddenly observed. There was a little whispering rustle over every tea-table in the precincts, and then there was a breathless pause of observation. The pause was broken by a word or two here ; a little, meaning, matter-of-course smile there ; and the topic of the hour burst into full blossom. The precincts talked of nothing but Lady Karslake and “ young Dr. Branston.”

The subject was confined to the precincts at first ; but after Lady Karslake had summoned North to her carriage window in the market-place on more than one occasion, and had kept him talking in the bookseller's shop, it asserted itself as one of those topics which united precincts and town in a common interest. The town had naturally less opportunity of observing the phenomena at first hand, since Lady Karslake did not visit within its sphere. Its interest was, consequently, at that smouldering, hardly articulate stage, which insufficient detail involves, when, towards the end of January, one of those semi-public

occasions presented itself which afforded a meeting ground for town, precincts, and county.

Two such occasions, indeed, presented themselves in intoxicating proximity to one another; two occasions which convulsed Alnchester on their own merits, but which, nevertheless, derived an added excitement from the thought which palpitated delightedly through the town, that they would afford opportunities for that personal observation of the centres of interest which would loosen every tongue. These two occasions were the opening of the Cottage Hospital for children at Hatherleigh, and the annual Infirmary ball which was fixed for the evening of the same day. Where the subject was discussed at all—tentatively and in whispers—it was a moot point as to which occasion would prove the more fruitful to the discriminating observer: the opening, as it was called, or the ball. The opening, however, as coming first, had a certain advantage in the balance of excitement; and Alnchester flocked out to Hatherleigh, the day having arrived, on the tip-toe of anticipation.

“Will you kindly tell me if anything extraordinary has happened to my bonnet?” said Lady Karlake, with a little laugh.

She was standing in the refreshment tent, thrown out from one of the wards of the new hospital for the opening day. The opening ceremony was over, and the large tent was thronged from end to end with Alnchester, great and small, town rubbing shoulders with precincts, county blandly smiling on both; the whole permeated with an atmosphere of excited enjoyment which, considering the heat of the over-warmed, over-lighted, and over-filled place, spoke well for the general spirits of the majority. Lady Karlake was standing near the entrance from the hospital, a very dainty picture in soft brown,

with a cup of tea in her hand. Her question was addressed to Archdeacon French, who was standing beside her, holding her muff; and his eyes rested on her with a grave, appreciative smile as he answered,—

“I am not a judge of bonnets, I fear, but the condition of yours appears to me to be—normal. May I inquire what has raised so uneasy a spirit in you?”

She laughed.

“If you were not a man,” she said gaily, “you would be aware that almost every woman in the place has favoured me with a more or less critical and disapproving inspection. If my bonnet isn’t crooked, I suppose it’s not the fashion in Alnchester! The Alnchester fashion is very decided.”

Archdeacon French smiled, as he was obviously called upon to do; but it was rather an absent-minded expression of amusement, and his keen eyes as they rested on her were grave and perplexed.

“Suppose we go further on?” he said. “Perhaps our position, so near the entrance, is rather more conspicuous than you care about?”

She accepted his consideration for her with a gracious smile and gesture of negation.

“Thanks!” she said. “I don’t think the criticism is very formidable—is it?—and I told Dr. Branston he would find me here when he came off duty. Those good people take a long time to get themselves off, don’t they?”

The “good people” thus referred to were the Sheriff of the county and his wife, who were being attended to their carriage by the committee and authorities of the Hospital, among whom North Branston was, of course, numbered.

Archdeacon French did not answer immediately, and when he did speak his words were no reply to her last sentence.

"I observe, Lady Karlake," he said pleasantly, "if you will forgive my saying so, that you are one of the few people who appreciate Branston."

She glanced up at him with quick, surprised eyes.

"Is it an appreciation we share?" she said lightly. "I assure you I thought I stood alone!"

He shook his head with a slight smile.

"I have known him many years," he said. "He has a position in Alnchester of exceptional difficulty; a position which would be more easily rendered utterly untenable than improved."

Archdeacon French's tone had grown very grave as he concluded; graver, as it seemed, than he had at first intended. But Lady Karlake did not notice it. She had glanced carelessly towards the entrance and was smiling a greeting to North Branston as he made his way towards them.

"Here you are!" she said, as he joined them. "In an unofficial capacity at last, I trust? Why a man who is at other times a friendly creature should invariably become intolerable when he is in office is a riddle which either of you may solve if you can. Now," she continued, turning to North, "you had better come and have some tea after your exertions!"

She moved carelessly in the direction of the refreshment buffet, North Branston following her example. Archdeacon French paused for perhaps a second, then he too turned, and the three went down the tent together.

"Why, there's Archdeacon French having tea with them!"

The comment had expressed itself all over the room in glances, covert gestures, and half-finished murmurs; and the above definite if rather breathless exclamation was uttered by Mrs. Bennett. Having given utterance to the above startling statement, she added in a dis-

appointed tone which strove to be thoroughly impartial, "Well, that doesn't look as if the Archdeacon saw anything to disapprove, now does it?"

The companion to whom this question was addressed was Miss Goode; and Miss Goode shook her head shrewdly as she answered,—

"The Archdeacon is a man! And men are as stupid as owls about that sort of thing, don't you think? Did you notice them—Lady Karslake and Dr. Branston—before the opening, and when the wards were being shown? He never left her side, my dear Mrs. Bennett—never once! I never saw anything more marked! Oh, there's no doubt it has been going on for weeks. I've heard of it from several quarters."

Mrs. Bennett nodded sagely.

"Of course," she said; "so have I, my dear. And so has everyone for that matter. Well, it does puzzle me! I'm not surprised at anything in Dr. Branston, I must say; but what she can see in him—that's what passes me."

"What does he see in her, I say?" returned Miss Goode emphatically. "Dr. Branston——"

She stopped abruptly. There had been a little sharp movement in the crowd to her right, and Miss Goode found herself face to face with Constance Vallotson, who, with Bryan Armitage, must have been almost at her elbow throughout the conversation. A rather incoherent greeting of the girl broke from both ladies simultaneously, and then sudden business claimed them on the other side of the room, and they moved away in some haste.

"Here's a chair, Connie," said Bryan, also speaking with rather incoherent haste. "Up in the corner. Come on!"

Constance's head was extraordinarily erect, and there

was an immensely superior scorn on her pretty little face; but her cheeks were slightly flushed, nevertheless. She followed him in silence, but when they were seated she turned to him majestically.

"Have you heard anything of that sort, before, Bryan?" she demanded. "Anything about North and Lady Karslake, I mean? Ah, yes, I see you have! Now could there be a stronger argument in favour of what I am always trying to make you see?"

Constance's plan had advanced considerably—as far as discussion may be considered advancement—in the last two months. A large proportion of the young men and maidens of Alnchester had been introduced to such an outline of her projected club as might be suited to their inferior intellects, and the idea had been received with enthusiasm. It was, indeed, in perfect working order—on paper—and only waited a preliminary step the necessity of which was acknowledged, even while the state of things it indicated was deplored, by the president herself; namely, some conversation on the subject with the Alnchester elders. Bryan Armitage, however, alone knew the whole mind of Alnchester's future regenerator, and all that the club was to develop into. Eminently unsatisfactory as he had proved himself from the first, he remained her sole confidant; and much time, much careful thought, and much lucid argument had been expended by her in the uphill task of fitting him for his position.

He turned his face to her now, still flushed and indignant as Mrs. Bennett's words had left it, and looked at her in blank incomprehension which spoke but ill for the progress he had effected.

"I don't see that, Connie," he said.

"Because you don't reason," said Constance severely. "It's perfectly obvious if you look at it in the right way.

Of course there's nothing between North and Lady Karslake. They are friends, I suppose. But people like the Alnchester people can't recognize the possibility of friendship between man and woman. And why not? Because their ideas need to be enlarged! And large ideas can only be induced by the larger-minded training of youth."

There was a lofty positivism about the last words which should surely have convinced any right-minded young man; but Bryan Armitage did not seem to be greatly impressed by it. He was playing absently with the end of her fur boa which lay on her knee.

"Do you believe in friendship between a man and a woman, Con?" he said.

The large-eyed pity and contempt of the glance which she turned upon him might have withered him had he looked up, but he did not.

"My dear Bryan!" she said. "Don't ask such trivial questions! You surely don't expect me to thrash out that time-honoured old argument with you! Of course I believe in it! My dear boy, if you will think for a moment, you will see that you and I exemplify it in our own persons! The very fact that there can ever have existed a question on the subject shows how entirely false a conception of the whole subject has prevailed."

He looked up with a little sigh and a quick laugh.

"And yet it's pretty firmly rooted—that conception," he said. "I don't believe it'll come up in a hurry."

"Radical reform is never effected in a hurry," was the majestic rejoinder, "and radical reform is what is needed. It is the ridiculous constraint of the relations between man and woman which is at the bottom of everything."

The didactic little voice was so childish; the words uttered with such conviction were so obviously a formula, that the irrepressible flash of merriment in the eyes of

the young man by her side seemed to meet it more fittingly than his equally irrepressible movement of intense distaste.

"I say, Con," he said abruptly, "I hate to vex you, dear, but I do fight shy of hearing you say things like that! Look here, dear, I'm an awful duffer, and can't explain it properly, but I know there's no end of a screw loose somewhere; you take my word for it. Don't be angry with me for saying so, that's a good girl."

Constance rose serenely, and regarded him with an air of calm pity.

"No, I'm not angry with you," she said. "It distresses me very much to see how very stupid you are, Bryan, but men are all alike, and I suppose you can't help it. Look, there's mother! She wants me to go!" She stopped suddenly, gazing across to where Mrs. Vallotson stood on the other side of the room, alone as it seemed for the moment, waiting for her daughter, to whom she had beckoned. "Bryan," she said abruptly, "doesn't mother look very odd? Oh, Bryan, it really is too bad! She must have heard the kind of thing we heard. She has stiff little old-fashioned theories, you know, unfortunately, and it's the kind of thing that would annoy her awfully."

Bryan had followed the direction of her eyes, and to him also it seemed that there was an odd pallor about Mrs. Vallotson's face.

"She looks awfully tired, Con," he said reassuringly, "but I expect that's all. We'll go across to her. I say, Connie, which are my dances for to-night?"

CHAPTER XVI.

THERE is one place whither the first breath of gossip is certain to penetrate, and where it will as certainly be nourished into circumstantial evidence ; namely, the kitchen or servants' hall, according to circumstances, of the subject of the gossip. Lady Karslake's servants knew a great deal more about her intercourse with North Branston than she knew herself, and the topic had been well threshed out among them while yet it was hardly full-blown in Alnchester. The subject was handled at Hatherleigh Grange with much enjoyment, but without malice. Lady Karslake, as has been said, was popular with her servants, and Sir William was not. Consequently it was the general opinion that the flirtation assumed was so natural as hardly to be reprehensible.

To this opinion there was one obstinate dissentient voice. Mrs. Pike, the woman who attended on Sir William Karslake, had been in his service for fifteen years ; and length of service, though it had created in her no attachment to a master to whom she was neither more nor less than a well-tried machine, had developed in her a certain stern sense of loyalty towards him. It was Mrs. Pike's consistently expressed opinion that " such doings " were " scandalous."

On the afternoon of the opening of the Cottage Hospital, tea in the housekeeper's room had been highly seasoned with a detailed and vividly-coloured report of the doings of " my lady and the doctor " at a certain dinner-

party at the Dean's ; a report which had reached its present terminus through a parlourmaid and two footmen. Mrs. Pike had uplifted her protest and had then relapsed into condemnatory silence ; and when the ringing of the library bell resulted in a summons to her from her master, she rose up from her place and departed with a forbidding expression of countenance. Her face did not soften as she went on her way, and when she came in sight of the library door she paused abruptly, and her thoughts became audible.

"He ought to know it !" she said half aloud. "Poor gentleman, and never there to see for himself !"

Then she knocked respectfully, and presented herself before her master.

Sir William was walking up and down the room with quick, rather uneven steps, and the face he turned to the door was slightly pinched, as though with pain.

"Get me those drops, Pike," he said sharply. "The old ones. Ah !"

He caught suddenly at the back of a chair, and then sank into it with a sound that was half a groan and half an imprecation.

The attack was a slight one, however ; and half an hour later he was lying on the sofa, looking worn and pale, but little exhausted. Nor was there any weakness about his voice as he said,—

"That will do, Pike. You can go."

But Pike did not go. She stood where she was, her hands clasped rather nervously together, watching him with an undecided expression on her stern face.

"I'm afraid, Sir William, that you won't feel inclined to go out this evening," she said slowly.

"To go out ?" repeated Sir William indifferently.

"Yes, sir. To the Alnchester ball."

Sir William had taken up a magazine, and he half

turned his head towards the speaker as if intending to suppress her unusual loquacity. But he did not take that trouble.

"I had no intention of going to the ball," he said.

There was a moment's pause, and then the woman spoke again,—

"My mistress is going, I believe, sir?"

Again Sir William moved as if to utter a peremptory dismissal, and again indolence dominated the impulse.

"Yes," he said.

"Don't you think, sir, if you'll pardon the liberty in an old servant, that it's—it's unfortunate that my lady should have to go about so much by herself?"

The voice was hurried and uneven, and Mrs. Pike's fingers were locked convulsively together.

There was a silence—the silence of ages it seemed to Mrs. Pike. Sir William Karslake had lifted his eyes suddenly from his magazine, a curious keenness coming to his face in one swift flash. Then he lay motionless. At last he said,—

"Why 'unfortunate,' Pike?"

His tone was so quiet that a certain measure of reassurance came to Mrs. Pike, and she went on with nervous eagerness.

"My lady is but young, sir!" she said. "And ladies like her don't always think too much of what they do and say! And people are very quick to talk, Sir William, if I may take the liberty of reminding you, and—and—it's that young doctor, sir, Dr. Branston, that ought to have a horsewhip took to him, in my opinion."

The magazine sank in Sir William's hands slowly, very slowly, until it lay beside him on the sofa. His face for one moment might have been carved out of grey stone, so livid a pallor had descended upon it, and so utterly expressionless was it. Then into his eyes

there crept gradually an expression so strange, so cynical in its slow acceptance of the idea thus placed before him as to be wholly indescribable. There was only one thing distinct and definite to be stated of his face at that moment. It was not the face of a man confronted by a confirmation of any previous suspicion, but of a man confronted with an entirely new idea.

How long she stood there rooted to the ground Mrs. Pike could never have told. She only knew that the moment at last arrived when Sir William rose slowly from his sofa, and motioned her towards the door, and that she left the room as fast as her shaking limbs could carry her.

It was within a few minutes of the dinner-hour when Lady Karslake came into the drawing-room that evening. She had reached home late, and had spent the intervening time in her own room.

"I felt lazy," she declared gaily as she entered the drawing-room. "I required a book and a little fresh air, metaphorically speaking, to fortify me before I take another large dose of Alnchester! Have you been out, William, this afternoon?"

Her tone to her husband had never recovered that subtle something which it had lost on the night when he announced to her his dismissal of North Branston. Her voice had distinctly gained in indifference and lost in friendliness, and there was a rather chilly carelessness in her face. She came up to the fire, and stood with her hands spread out to the blaze.

Sir William Karslake was sitting in a large arm-chair a little to her right. He was unoccupied, but he did not move as his wife approached, except for the slight turn of his head which brought her within his line of sight. He was lividly pale—far paler than he had been just after his attack of the afternoon—there were odd lines traced about

his mouth, and in his eyes, as they rested on his wife there was a cynicism which was touched by something like malignance.

He made no attempt to answer her—a discourtesy which in so punctiliously courteous a man was somewhat noticeable. Lady Karslake, however, did not observe it.

“Alnchester, in crowds,” she went on carelessly, “may be described as stuffy! From every point of view, stuffy. I’m not thoroughly sure that it is not beginning to pall upon me!”

“That is a circumstance greatly to be deplored.”

Sir William Karslake uttered the words very slowly, and in a peculiarly dry and quiet tone about which there was an inflection which his wife had never heard in it before. She paused a moment, listening to its echoes in her memory, and wondering with a quick tingling of her blood whether it was her fancy that detected in it something approaching to a sneer.

“Oh, I don’t mean that it’s anything very serious!” she said with a laugh. “There are people here and there who entertain me exquisitely. A delightful old canoness was introduced to me this afternoon, for instance, with whom I could cheerfully spend long days.”

“May I suggest that the narration of these entertaining meetings, humorous as they are, unfortunately share the common lot in becoming slightly monotonous to the listener?”

That inflection in Sir William’s voice—intensely, unassailably polite as it was—had developed strongly, and his wife turned to him with a swift movement, her head thrown back, her cheeks flushed. She looked at him for a moment in a most eloquent silence, and then, with a spirited, dignified gesture, she turned away and took up a paper which lay upon a table.

There was an interval of dead silence. Lady Karlake read her paper with a flash in her eyes. Sir William Karlake looked into the fire.

"I believe you intend to go to the Alnchester ball to-night?"

Sir William's gaze had passed from the fire to his wife's figure. Lady Karlake, however, did not raise her head.

"Yes!" she said coldly and briefly.

"I conclude you are not dressed?" he continued, surveying the delicate tea-gown which she wore with the glance of a man in whom a cruel instinct towards fault-finding is gradually becoming irrepressible. "Will you pardon my remarking how greatly I dislike the fashion of your present gown? It is a fashion, as I observe, which you affect."

"Which renders your dislike for it exceedingly unfortunate."

The rejoinder broke from Lady Karlake quickly and haughtily. The gong sounding at that instant, she turned impulsively, and moved towards the door.

The conversation at dinner, rendered necessary by the presence of the servants, consisted mainly of a suave monologue by Sir William Karlake, from which that covert sneer never wholly disappeared, and into which his wife now and again threw a brief, disdainful monosyllable. She had paid the slightest possible regard to his conversation, indeed, when dinner being nearly over, he said after a slight pause,—

"At what time have you ordered the carriage?"

"At ten o'clock!" she answered carelessly.

He looked across at her with an unpleasant smile.

"That is early," he said suavely. "Half an hour later would have served our purpose quite as well. We shall only show ourselves, I conclude."

"I do not care to be late," she began, and then she

stopped suddenly. "You don't intend to go yourself, William?" she said.

He smiled again.

"Yes," he said, "I do."

She shrugged her shoulders with a little gesture of amazement, but she said no more until the servants had left the room. Then she said, in a tone of quick remonstrance,—

"Surely, William, you are being rather unwise. You have been warned so emphatically against this kind of fatigue."

Sir William leaned back in his chair and met her eyes.

"I intend to go," he said quietly.

"But why?" she urged, her spirit rising angrily under his gaze, though she could not have told why, and the colour coming to her cheeks. "You won't enjoy it, I am sure. And I hear that you have not been well, as it is, to-day. Really, it seems to me a most foolish proceeding."

Sir William Karslake rose deliberately.

"That I can quite understand," he said, with a polite irony that was more effective than any openly insolent speech could have been. "I regret very much to have to force my company upon you, but I must trouble you to let me judge for myself in the matter. Allow me to suggest that it is time you went to dress."

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CHAPTER XVII.

THE Alnchester Infirmary ball was an eminently punctual entertainment. The tickets bore upon them the words "Nine-thirty to two a.m." ; and from nine-thirty until ten o'clock the stream of arrivals flowed fast and strong.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when Sir William and Lady Karslake entered the room. Lady Karslake had kept her husband and the horses waiting for nearly half an hour, and, to judge from the carriage of her head and the mutinous set of her mouth, she was far from feeling any compunction for that act of discourtesy. She was magnificently dressed, and if the extra moments had been spent upon her toilet, they had certainly been used to advantage, for she was looking singularly well. Her maid, however, could have said that the delay had been wilful and deliberate, and a perceptive observer would have added that it was to no detail of dress that her appearance owed its effect. There was a delicate tension about her carriage, a vivid fire of expression which made her appearance even unusually full of verve and brilliancy.

She glanced round the room with a little scornful curl of her lip—an expression which at any other time would have been a smile, half mocking and half amused.

"What a crowd!" she murmured to her husband. "And what excruciating music! Is there anyone one knows, do you imagine? Ah!"

The monosyllable was uttered in quite another tone. It was low, it was rather pleased, and there was a sudden suggestion of womanly waywardness about it through which her temper palpitated unchecked. She paused as she uttered it, and sent a friendly, familiar bow and smile to where North Branston stood leaning against the wall at a little distance. Then she turned to her husband with a flash of malicious satisfaction in her eyes.

"There is Dr. Branston," she said carelessly.

Her husband's face was quite impassive—singularly so, in fact. His eyes had lost nothing of their strange expression, but he was less lividly pale than he had been earlier in the evening. He glanced across the room, and bowed politely.

"He does not appear to take much interest in us," said Lady Karlake. "I don't choose to be treated like that. Ah, Mr. Howard, how do you do?"

She lifted her fan as she spoke, careless of the two or three acquaintances who had joined them, with a gesture that North was obliged to obey. He moved slowly and came towards her. Before he reached her side Sir William Karlake had drifted a pace or two away, and was exchanging greetings and comments with some of his county neighbours.

Perhaps North Branston saw the movement, and put his own construction on it, for there was a slight shade of defiance on his face as he reached Lady Karlake. Perhaps Lady Karlake saw it also, for the little laugh with which she received him had a mischievous ring, touched with an excitement which testified to the unusual strain upon upon her temper and nerves.

"Why were you not coming to speak to me?" she demanded imperiously. "Did you gather from my appearance that I am in a very bad temper? Well, I

am ! I feel—inclined to scratch—do you know ? Shall you mind if I scratch you ? ”

“ I don’t think the operation would be formidable,” returned North with a smile.

“ That’s because you are a man ! As a matter of fact it would be horrid ! What sort of floor is this, Dr. Branston ? ”

North glanced at it rather dubiously.

“ I believe it’s pretty good,” he said. “ Do you want to dance, Lady Karslake ? ”

“ Is that your form of invitation, Dr. Branston ? It is characteristic at least. Yes, I believe I do want to dance. I think it might do me good. Is the next a waltz ? You may have it.”

And the music bursting forth vociferously at the moment, she slipped her hand into his arm, let him lead her farther into the room, and in a moment more they had glided away almost alone.

Alnchester looked on for the moment almost too wide-eyed to remember its manners.

Observations at the “ opening ” had developed the interest of the hour from a possibility to an actuality, and the night, with the opportunities which it was likely to involve for the accumulation of further detail, had been anticipated with considerable excitement. The appearance of Lady Karslake accompanied by her husband had produced an electrifying effect. Sir William Karslake was hardly known, even by sight, in Alnchester ; one of the features of the situation was the fact that her husband never went about with its heroine, and was consequently in total ignorance as to her doings. His appearance at the ball, then, was fraught, for the penetrating spectator, with possibilities of absolutely breathless interest. Would Lady Karslake alter her demeanour towards North Branston for her husband’s

presence? And if not, how would Sir William take it?

The answer to the first question, implied in the spectacle of Lady Karlake waltzing with North Branston before she had been ten minutes in the room, was so definite as to produce quite a staggering effect. Town and precincts recovered themselves, however, simultaneously, and gave themselves up with a rush to the delightful task of providing an answer to the second question by personal observation.

There were very few elderly female inhabitants of Alnchester who could not have told at any given moment, as the night wore on, where the three personages round whom the sensation surged were to be found; and on the countenance of Sir William Karlake they would one and all cheerfully have stood an examination, though the differences existing between the respective readings of those courteously impassive features might have contributed to a rather incoherent result. The heroine of the hour certainly gave their watchfulness the slightest possible trouble. Lady Karlake danced her waltz from beginning to end, and then, distributing careless bows and smiles to her acquaintances, commanded North Branston to take her somewhere where it was cool.

"My dear, I heard her myself!" said one agitated lady to another. "Speaking to him quite as if there was an understanding between them, and out loud, you know!"

An interlude during which Lady Karlake strolled about the room with the Sheriff and chatted discursively with every one she knew, was looked upon as so obvious an attempt at throwing dust in her husband's eyes as to be almost an outrage; and matters were felt to have assumed a more seemly and open complexion when she danced three times in succession with North

Branston, and then went to supper with him. To persist in ignoring the position longer would have been obviously futile. Alnchester did not attempt the impossible, and comments, whispered and audible, began to fly about like wild-fire.

"It's scandalous, my dear," murmured Mrs. Eliot, with lugubrious enjoyment, to Mrs. Bennett. "It's a dreadful thing to say, but there's no other word for it. And so embarrassing. I assure you I've really been avoiding the Vallotsons. They must be so uncomfortable, you know."

Her companion grasped her arm excitedly.

"Look!" she whispered breathlessly. "Just look! they've just come back from supper and they're meeting Sir William face to face. Oh, my dear Mrs. Eliot, doesn't he look awful! If we were to walk just a few steps nearer we should hear what they say."

Mrs. Bennett's mild blue eyes must have been possessed of singular penetration to detect anything in the least awe-inspiring in Sir William Karslake's face as his wife, with her hand resting lightly on North Branston's arm, came gaily towards him. His handsome features were stamped with a suave, cold courtesy.

Lady Karslake's face was flushed and animated; her temper seemed to have passed into a species of mischievous enjoyment.

"Are you ready to go, William?" she said lightly. "I'm dancing this, and then I'm ready." And she passed on with a little nod.

"He said nothing," said Mrs. Bennett in an awestruck whisper to Mrs. Eliot, a hurried strategic movement having brought them within five paces of Sir William's elbow. "Oh, my dear, there's Mrs. Vallotson looking at us. I know she thinks we're talking about it. Dear me, I should have thought she would have felt it more

than she seems to, judging from her face. Her own brother, you know. I think I ought to go and speak to her and tell her how sorry I am."

Mrs. Vallotson was sitting erect and composed against the wall at right angles to that close to which Mrs. Bennett stood. Her eyes were fixed upon the two speakers, and there was a rather singular expression in their cold, black depths.

Mrs. Bennett edged her way round the dancers, and squeezed herself rather forcibly into the seat by Mrs. Vallotson.

"I see you've no one to speak to," she said comfortably, "so I thought I would just come and tell you how distressed I am! Such an uncomfortable evening for you, I'm afraid!"

"Not at all, thank you!" said Mrs. Vallotson calmly.

"Not—oh, I'm sure I'm very glad! People will talk, of course, and really—your brother—Lady Karlake—that is—the whole thing is so very pronounced."

"People are very ready to talk, as you say," was the composed answer. "I do not consider their talk of any great importance. I see that old Mrs. Ward has come back from supper, and I promised to go and talk to her a little."

Mrs. Vallotson rose as she spoke, and moved round the room. Her way led her directly past Sir William Karlake as he stood leaning against the wall, watching the dancers, and as she reached his side she paused abruptly. He turned his head and saw her. The next instant he had moved politely, and was holding out his hand to her. There was a little smile in his eyes, and as she met them Mrs. Vallotson's colour stood out in great patches against a livid pallor.

"How do you do, Mrs. Vallotson?" said Sir William Karlake politely. "I am glad to have the pleasure."

Mrs. Vallotson did not return his greeting. She laid her hand in his with a stiff mechanical gesture.

"What are you going to do?" she said in a low, hoarse voice.

The smile in his eyes deepened, as he watched her, into a cruel significance.

"Do?" he said also in a low tone. "Oh, nothing! What is there to do?"

At that instant Lady Karslake and North Branston disengaged themselves from among the dancers, and came to a standstill beside them.

"Ah, Mrs. Vallotson!" exclaimed Lady Karslake gaily. "So glad to meet you! William, I am tired out; I want to go home."

"I am quite at your service," he returned blandly, "Good night, Mrs. Vallotson; good night, Dr. Branston." He turned, holding out his hand to the younger man; and as North, after an instant's hesitation, laid his own hand in it, Mrs. Vallotson turned abruptly and walked away.

CHAPTER XVIII.

It would hardly have seemed to an impartial observer, prior to the departure of Sir William and Lady Karlake, that their presence in the ball-room acted as much restraint upon the discussion of the sensation of the evening ; but their departure, nevertheless, brought about a rising in the tide of excitement and gossip, as conspicuous as it was sudden. Everybody began to talk of the same thing at the same moment, and sundry glances cast at North Branston and at the Vallotsons seemed to imply that nothing was needed to Alnchester's felicity, but that they should follow the example set them and leave the field perfectly clear.

Such satisfaction, however, was not in store for Alnchester. North Branston had been observed, very shortly after Lady Karlake's departure, making his way towards the door ; but his intentions were obviously frustrated by a brief word or two that passed between him and Mrs. Vallotson—who had met him, as it seemed, by accident—and he took up a position near the door evidently in indifferent waiting for his family party. For more than an hour after this Mrs. Vallotson herself moved about the room, oblivious, apparently, of the blight which invariably fell, as she drew near, upon the conversations which she interrupted ; her manner uncomposed as usual ; her colour still

standing out in patches, as it had done when she met Sir William Karslake's eyes.

The room was thinning rapidly when Constance at last received a message to the effect that her mother wished to go. Dr. and Mrs. Vallotson were standing together when the girl joined them—the former excessively pompous and self-assertive, and inclined, like a child who has been too long kept from his bed, to be fractious ; and as Constance appeared, North Branston came up to the party.

"I shall walk home," he said curtly.

"Are you starting at once ?"

The words came from Mrs. Vallotson in an abrupt voice. North Branston answered only with a gesture of assent, turned on his heel, and departed.

If a regenerator of society may ever be said to wrangle, the short drive home was occupied by a wrangle between Constance and her father, over a trifling detail connected with the arrangements of the ball. Constance had been dancing all night, and presumably even regenerators are not proof against over-excitement and over-fatigue, for there was decided irritability in her voice and manner as she turned to her mother, when they stood in the hall, for confirmation of her opinion. Apparently, however, Mrs. Vallotson had not heard the discussion which had gone on at her side ; she did not seem even to hear her daughter's final words.

She bent forward and touched the girl's forehead with her lips.

"Good night, Constance," she said. "Make haste to bed !"

"Far too opinionated !" ejaculated her father testily, as Constance disappeared. "Far too opinionated !" The dignity of this authoritative dictum was somewhat impeded by a vast yawn, and when speech was once

more possible to him Dr. Vallotson added with sleepy tentativeness,—

“And now, my dear, we may as well go up ourselves, perhaps? It’s really very late. I don’t know that I ever remember your caring to stay so long at the Infirmary ball. North will shut up. If you are quite ready, my dear——”

Dr. Vallotson was edging, as majestically as the action would allow, towards the staircase, when his wife’s voice stopped him. She spoke suddenly, and with some violence.

“I am not ready!” she said. “There is something to be done first!” She flung open the dining-room door, turned up the gas, and turned to confront her husband. Her eyes were glittering; her colour was deeper and more patchy than ever, and her lips were tightly compressed.

Dr. Vallotson, drawn as it seemed from his own course, in spite of himself, by the force of her manner, followed her as far as the threshold, and stood there regarding her dubiously.

“Something to do, my dear?” he said. “Surely not to-night?”

“To-night!” she answered harshly. “Before another hour has gone by. If you are content to go to sleep before you have asserted your authority, once and for all, Robert, I am not content to let you do it!”

In Dr. Vallotson’s face, settled into the half stupid, half conciliatory pompousness of exceeding sleepiness, there dawned a gleam of what should have been dignified acquiescence, hopelessly clouded by incomprehension.

“Quite so, my dear, quite so!” he began with feeble majesty.

His wife stopped short, and looked at him for a moment.

“Is it possible,” she said slowly, “that you’ve heard

nothing? That you've observed nothing? That no one has said anything to you?"

Dr. Vallotson drew himself up testily.

"I have held conversation with nearly every one in the room," he said. "And I think I may say that I am not in the habit of allowing anything to pass me unobserved. I am really at a loss, Adelaide——"

For the second time Dr. Vallotson's words were broken off. With a wave of her hand, before which his pomposity seemed to shrink into nothing, his wife advanced suddenly and rapidly to the door. Dr. Vallotson gave way to her, advancing hastily into the room, and she stood there on the threshold with her back to the room as the front door opened and North Branston came into the house.

He paused for an instant, surprised, apparently, to see her. He was passing her, however, with a rapid, indifferent "Good night, Adelaide!" when Mrs. Vallotson said in a quick, hoarse voice,—

"Come in here!"

She moved and went back into the room; North hesitated for a moment, and then with a slight surprise on his face he followed her.

Dr. Vallotson had taken up a position near the fireplace at the farther end of the room. With the introduction of North Branston, something of the vague, sleepy fractiousness of his expression had become focussed. Confronted with a recognized source of annoyance, an indefinite, if distinctly irascible, air of judicial severity had come upon him, and he stood with his hands behind his coat-tails. Mrs. Vallotson stood by the table between the two men; and North Branston, as he paused a few paces from the door, found himself confronted with the husband and wife.

Utterly ignoring North for the moment, it was to her

husband that Mrs. Vallotson turned. There was a suggestion behind the iron rigidity of the muscles of her face, terrible in so powerful a woman, as of a fierceness of passion, half wild, and hardly to be controlled.

"I did not expect," she said, and her voice as she addressed her husband rang with contempt, "to have to begin by telling you what has been the common talk of the night ; what is being discussed all over Alnchester and half over the county at this moment ; what everybody knows except you—you, whose business it is to know it. The head of a family should hardly need to be told when vigorous action is required of him ; when his household is becoming a byword among all the scandalmongers of the town. But since you appear to be the one ignorant person in Alnchester to-night, Robert, this is the state of the case."

She paused as though to control herself before proceeding, and the two men acknowledged her words each after his own fashion. Dr. Vallotson seemed to become absolutely inflated with angry self-importance, burning to vindicate itself by action as soon as he should understand on what line action was possible. He cast a wrathful glance at North Branston, as he said,—

"Quite so, Adelaide ! Quite so !"

North Branston did not speak. He leaned back against the sideboard with his arms folded ; his eyes were fixed on Mrs. Vallotson with a bitter, cynical enquiry in their depths ; Dr. Vallotson was not the only ignorant man in Alnchester that night.

"Flirtations with married women," went on Mrs. Vallotson, "are not common in Alnchester, whatever they may be in other places." Her voice was harsh and high, and there was a ring in it which, though she was still addressing her husband, seemed to hurl the words at North Branston on the other side of the room. "Such

a thing is a nine days' wonder here. If you choose to allow a member of your household to make himself the centre of a nine days' wonder, I do not ! Understand, Robert, that all the city is talking of the shameless flirtation carried on between Lady Karslake and——”

She spoke no name ; she only indicated North Branston with an indescribably vindictive gesture of passionate aversion. And even as she made the movement, almost before her last word was uttered, bursting into flame under the sudden influence of her violence as a long smouldering fire, at an unexpected touch, North Branston drew himself erect and brought down his closed hand upon the sideboard with a dull, resounding thud.

“ Good Heaven ! ” he said. “ Adelaide, this is too much ! ”

“ You're right ! It is too much ! ” Mrs. Vallotson had turned with a rough, furious movement, and was facing him as he stood, his face white to the lips. “ How dare you act as you have done ? How dare you make yourself the talk of the place ? Oh, you were encouraged, I have no doubt.” A shrill laugh, extraordinarily reckless and malignant, broke from her. “ Some women, I know, can't live without an affair of the sort ! Some women find amusement in courting a man distrusted and disliked by their husbands ! Some women——”

“ Adelaide, be silent ! By Heaven, you had better ! ”

He had crossed the room with a quick stride, and caught her by the wrist, his face working with the violent passion of a self-controlled man stirred beyond the limits of endurance, and for a moment the two pairs of hot, flashing eyes held one another as in a grip which neither could break. Then Mrs. Vallotson wrenched her wrist out of his grasp, and drew back a step, still facing him.

“ Very well,” she said harshly. “ She's no concern of

mine. She's used to affairs of the kind, no doubt. It's you that we're concerned with." She turned suddenly to her husband. "Tell him, Robert," she said, indicating North with a fierce, relentless gesture, "tell him yourself, as head of this house, that while he lives under your roof such things shall not be. Tell him that you will not be made a party to them. Tell him that he has your orders to drop all acquaintance with this woman from this time forth."

What Dr. Vallotson might have said, how far the puny flickering of outraged morality and pompous wrath with which his face was crimson, and to which he had been feebly struggling to give voice, would have been sustained or overwhelmed by the fierce fire which blazed about him, was never to be known. Before he could speak North Branston struck in with an excited sarcastic laugh.

"Orders!" he said. "We'll stop there, Adelaide, if you please. Suppose I tell you that I acknowledge no man's right to give me orders, that I take orders from no man. What then?"

The swelling protestation that burst from Dr. Vallotson's indignant lips was checked in its very birth by an abrupt instinctive gesture from his wife. Urge him to the forefront of the battle as she might, it was evident that she could neither trust him there nor restrain her own fierce impulse.

"You talk mere foolishness," she said hotly. "And you know it. What are you here for but to take orders? What is your position in this house but that of a subordinate? When you are spoken to you will obey."

"You will obey, sir. You will obey!" vociferated Dr. Vallotson, his indignation in its pettiness serving as a strange foil against which the depths of passion in the other two stood out in strong relief.

"I think not," said North. He was looking full into

Mrs. Vallotson's face, and he ignored her husband's words as though they had never been uttered. "I think not. Adelaide, I've heard enough—and thought enough, Heaven knows—since I was a little chap, of what I owe to you and to your husband. I'll tell you now what I don't owe you—what I've never received from you. I owe you no consideration, no respect, no affection. My position in this house! Good Heavens, if it comes to that, I know far better than you do what that position is, and what it's doing for me. You've gone a step too far to-night, along a road you've walked for many a day."

He had spoken tersely, vehemently, with the rush and glow of long pent-up feeling suddenly released. And Mrs. Vallotson took up the word, her face almost distorted by the tumult within her, to which the harsh tones bore witness.

"The step too far is yours," she said. "And you'll retrace it. Acknowledge your disgraceful conduct here and now. Apologize for the false position in which you have placed me and my family. Assure me that no word or act of yours shall give occasion for further scandal, or else this house is no longer your home."

North Branston laughed fiercely.

"You give yourself away, Adelaide," he said recklessly. "Scandal? The word is an insult as contemptible as the minds in which it originated—unless, indeed, it is of your sole creation. Home? It's a thing I've never known. I am hardly to be coerced by empty sounds like that."

"You refuse——"

The furious, ungovernable voice stopped suddenly; stopped on a sharp turn of North Branston's head, a sharp movement of his hand which seemed to come from him mechanically and involuntarily in the very midst of his passion. And in the moment's dead silence that followed, faint and clear through the sleeping house, from North Branston's bedroom upstairs came the sound of a

bell. It stopped, and then rang out again, long and persistently.

"The night bell!" said North in the strange strained tone of violent feeling stemmed at its very flood. Without another word he crossed the room and went out into the hall.

Mrs. Vallotson stood where he left her, transfixed, almost stupefied as it seemed, by the sudden breaking off of her speech. Dr. Vallotson's attention had half followed North; the remnant that remained was held in check by the strange rigidity of his wife's figure and by her heavy laboured breathing. North Branston had not closed the door, and each low-toned word as it was uttered on the threshold of the house was distinctly audible in the dining-room.

"Who is it?"

"From Hatherleigh, sir! A note from my lady. I've brought the dog cart, and I was to say for Heaven's sake make haste, sir!"

"It's Dr. Vallotson you want, not me!"

"No, sir, it's you! Dr. Branston. Look at the note sir."

There was a sharp crackling sound as of the quick tearing of paper, and then North Branston strode back into the room and handed a sheet of notepaper hurriedly to Dr. Vallotson.

"Sir William Karslake sends for me," he said harshly. "For me, particularly, you see. What do you wish me to do?"

For answer Dr. Vallotson took the note and read it aloud in accents of pompous incredulity and indignation.

"DEAR DR. BRANSTON,—Will you come at once? I think my husband is dying. He particularly desires to see you.

"Yours,

"EVE KARSLAKE."

The brief sentences, so eloquent in their baldness—even thus read—of the presence of that grim shadow which dwarfs all life to insignificance, struck against the tumult upon which they had broken, seeming to meet and gather together all the waters of strife with one sharp turn into a new channel. In the sudden professional significance thus given to the scene, Mrs. Vallotson seemed to have been swept aside. The contest had abruptly shifted its ground; it lay now, a burning question throbbing and vibrating with all the excitement and passion of that which had gone before, between the two men. North Branston stood with one clenched hand resting heavily on the table, his eyes resting full on Dr. Vallotson—every line of his figure eloquent of challenge. Dr. Vallotson confronted him, his face full of angry indecision.

“What is to be done?” demanded North Branston briefly.

Dr. Vallotson tapped the letter with impotent irascibility.

“Why, of course—dear me—but—but you must go, I suppose! Really——”

“If I go, let it be distinctly understood that I do so under protest! That I go only on a definite summons, and by your express desire!”

The words came from North, flung out, in the strained and quivering condition of his nerves, in vehement repudiation of the position forced on him. He had not glanced again at Mrs. Vallotson. He seemed to be oblivious of her presence. But the voice that answered him was not Dr. Vallotson’s.

“Robert, no! What are you thinking of?”

It was a voice so strained, so hoarse, so unnatural as to be barely recognizable, and both men turned instinctively to the figure from which it proceeded. Mrs. Vallotson was clutching heavily at a chair as she stood, as if for

support. Her face was livid, and her great black eyes stared out of it—not at her husband, whom she addressed, but at North Branston. It was in the same unnatural voice, which seemed to force itself from her to her own agony, that she went on.

“He is your patient! He is your patient, I say! How do you know that it is not—a trick?”

A sharp, fierce imprecation had broken from North Branston, and he turned from her, white to the lips with hardly governable fury.

“By Heaven!” he said, between his clenched teeth, “That’s worthy of you, Adelaide! It’s a fit finish to all you’ve done and said to-night! I’d go now if all the etiquette of the profession were against it!”

He faced Dr. Vallotson abruptly.

“Do you come with me, or shall I go alone?” he said roughly.

Before Dr. Vallotson’s bewildered and vague disclaimer was well uttered, North Branston had turned on his heel and left the room. A moment later the front door had swung to behind him, and the galloping steps of a horse died away in the distance.

There was no glimmer of light in the sky when North Branston reopened Dr. Vallotson’s front door. He paused for a moment with his hand on the lock, looking back into the cold darkness of the early January morning, his face showing white and haggard in the waning starlight. He opened the door softly, and went in.

He closed the door behind him, and then he started. He had been absent three hours, and he had expected to find the house dark and still. It was still indeed—still as death itself; but the dining-room was lighted, just as he had left it, and there on the threshold stood Mrs. Vallotson alone.

She stood perfectly motionless, with one hand outstretched and grasping the doorway as if for support. Her features had a grey look about them, at once sharpened and sunken. Her eyes, with a singularly blank stare in them, were fastened on North Branston.

She was so close to him, and her appearance was so utterly unexpected, that for the instant North stopped short, confronting her in silence. And in that instant some strange magnetic influence seemed to pass from her scarcely breathing figure; to creep about him, to steal a hold upon his every sense, and to clutch him in a grip from which there was no escape. Involuntarily, and without consciousness on his part, a ghastly reflection of the strained intensity of her expression seemed to freeze the life out of his features; the horror in her eyes dawned gradually in his, and they stood there face to face, the only waking creatures in the quiet house, held together, as it were, by that which was as indefinite as it was irresistible.

"Well?"

He saw her lips frame the question, but whether he actually heard it or not he could not have told. Still with his eyes on hers and with sombre flashes of that deep-seated fire stirred into terrible evidence by the events of the night, he said,—

"Sir William Karslake is dead."

"Were you—in time?"

"No."

As he uttered the monosyllable North Branston seemed to wrench himself from the influence of her eyes. He turned abruptly towards the stairs. But as he reached their foot he stopped sharply and turned. The sound that had arrested his steps was the sound of a heavy fall. Mrs. Vallotson lay across the hall like a dead woman.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE outlook from the window of Archdeacon French's study, on a certain February afternoon, was very far from cheerful. The trees in the Close gardens shivered disconsolately under low, grey skies, and swayed to and fro before an occasional gust of wind which seemed to change the fine mist with which the air was heavy into a sudden blur of rain. Archdeacon French himself was paying no attention to the prospect from his windows, but judging from his expression as he paced slowly and thoughtfully up and down the room, the influence of the weather might have been heavy upon him. His face was very grave, and there was a slight trace of anxiety about it ; his eyes were clouded as if with preoccupation, and they were a little sad. He had stopped mechanically in his walk, and was gazing absently out over the grey gardens, when the door opened, and a servant announced : " Dr. Branston."

Archdeacon French turned quickly.

" Ah, Branston," he said, " that's right ! How are you ? "

The tone in which the words were uttered made them the cordial welcome of an expected visitor. And North Branston answered as they shook hands,—

" Many thanks for your note. I should have called though, anyhow."

" Taken your chance of finding me, and possibly have gone away without giving me a chance to say good-bye, eh ? I should have been sorry for that, Branston."

There was a moment's pause, and then North Branston, with a sudden glow in his deep-set eyes, answered quickly,—

"So should I, sir. Thank you."

Silence followed—one of those silences eloquent, not of constraint, but of a mutual sense of something which would render irrelevant, trivialities of every day. It was broken by Archdeacon French.

"You go to-morrow, I believe?" he said.

North Branston made a gesture of assent.

"Yes," he said. "By the three-twenty."

"The appointment is a good one?"

"Fairly. Yes; good on the whole."

"And it leads to better things?"

"It has been known to do so; yes."

Archdeacon French's words had come from him rather slowly—hardly perceptible intervals ensuing on North Branston's replies—his eyes all the time intently observant of the younger man's face.

"Good!" he said heartily, on the last words. He paused a moment, and then went on, with a reserved kindness of tone which was as full of tact as of sympathy. "I won't say how much we shall miss you here; you know that, I hope. But I will say how well pleased I am that you should be able to move out into a wider field. I may say now without impertinence what I have observed for some time; that Alnchester is a somewhat narrow sphere."

Neither the tone nor the slight smile with which the words were uttered brought any answering expression to North Branston's face. He was looking before him almost absently.

"Perhaps," he answered indifferently. "I don't know."

"You are looking forward to the change?"

Again Archdeacon French smiled.

A shrug of the shoulders was at first North Branston's only answer. Then he said listlessly,—

"I'm not much of an enthusiast, you know, sir. I don't expect much, one way or the other."

There was a moment's silence, and then the Archdeacon, changing the subject, began to talk of London and connexions of his own there, offering the younger man, in the course of his talk, sundry introductions, which were accepted frankly, if without any great warmth. And shortly afterwards North Branston rose.

"I have some patients to see," he said; "and a good many odds and ends to attend to."

His host rose also.

"Of course," he said pleasantly. "I'm only glad you made time to come and see me at all. You have a good many farewell visits on hand, I expect."

They were standing face to face now, and North looked back into the kind shrewd eyes with an odd gleam in his own.

"Do you think so, sir?" he said. "In Alnchester?"

There was an odd directness about the words which seemed to cross the indefinable barriers by which the previous conversation had been vaguely hedged about.

Archdeacon French held out his hand with a sudden movement; he gripped the fingers that met his strongly.

"My boy," he said firmly and directly, "you are making a mistake. You can't live on those terms with your fellow-men, and live all round. Here or in London you must be in touch with your world, or half your being is paralyzed. Good-bye, and all good wishes."

"Thank you, sir," returned North. There was a slight smile about his mouth, but he shook hands

heartily. "There's one good-bye I'm sorry to say, at any rate, and I say that now. Good-bye."

A moment or two later he had passed out into the grey dampness of the February afternoon.

Three weeks had passed since the Infirmary ball ; three weeks during which Alnchester had never been at a loss for a topic of conversation. The death of Sir William Karslake, following so suddenly upon the interest of the ball, had come as a climax so unforeseen, and on such other lines than had been looked for, that the first thrill which ran through Alnchester on receipt of the news was almost too awe-struck to be pleasurable. Alnchester recovered itself, however, almost immediately. Before the news was twelve hours old it had become possible to connect the new excitement with its somewhat paled predecessor, to the considerable heightening of both ; it had become possible to conjecture with solemn loquacity as to how far the dead man's seizure had been accelerated, or even induced, by the emotions excited in him by his wife's conduct, and to construct hypotheses, at about the rate of one per speaker, as to his widow's present state of mind with regard to her past behaviour. On Lady Karslake, indeed, her doings being still open to conjecture, the attention of Alnchester was particularly concentrated. The arrangements for the funeral, which took place in Alnchester cemetery, were discussed extensively in town and precincts—the detail in connection therewith which was most freely canvassed being the widow's personal presence at the grave—and her subsequent plans were breathlessly awaited. The interval of expectancy was not long. Three days after the funeral it was known in Alnchester that Hatherleigh Grange was to be sold ; that Lady Karslake was leaving England for Vienna, where her nearest connexions were established in the diplomatic service ; and the next news was that she was

actually gone. But the departure of Lady Karslake, though it closed one chapter of Alnchester gossip, save and except from the point of view of reminiscence, did not leave the city wholly destitute from a conversational point of view.

Side by side with the events at Hatherleigh, there had occurred events in the Vallotson household which would alone have created considerable talk. The news of Sir William Karslake's death ran through the city side by side with the news of Mrs. Vallotson's illness ; somewhat serious illness it was understood to be at first, involving total collapse and prostration. Opinions were somewhat divided as to whether the oncoming of this illness had been responsible for that callousness as to North Branston's reprehensible doings at the ball, which some people ascribed to her ; or whether the callousness in question was a mere figment, and extreme annoyance responsible for the illness. The latter theory reached the top of the poll by leaps and bounds, when, as Mrs. Vallotson began to move slowly towards convalescence, it became known in Alnchester that North Branston had accepted an appointment in London and was leaving immediately.

The news created quite a sensation. North Branston was leaving Dr. Vallotson's house in consequence of his disgraceful flirtation with Lady Karslake. Of this there was no doubt whatever in the public mind, and the flirtation in question promptly assumed immeasurably larger and more definite proportions. The old feeling against North came out of ambush, as it were, in the atmosphere of disgrace thus created about him. It was suddenly discovered that everybody had always known that he would never "do" in Alnchester, and that that immaculate city would be distinctly more herself when he was gone.

The day before his departure had come, and as North turned into the High Street after leaving Archdeacon French's house, he was passing through the street as a citizen of Alnchester almost for the last time. But there was no excitement or elation either about his face or manner. His expression was, perhaps, a shade more stern—a shade harder than usual ; and his manner as he exchanged one or two farewells was coldly indifferent.

He had visited his last patient and was just issuing again into the street, when a figure passing along the pavement in front of the house, with collar turned up and hands plunged rather disconsolately into the pockets of his coats, stopped short and extricated one of his hands quickly. It was Bryan Armitage.

"Hullo, North!" he said; "how jolly to meet you! You're off to-morrow, aren't you?"

It was the cheery, boyish phraseology to which Bryan was always addicted, but his voice was hardly so absolutely in keeping with it as had been its wont. It seemed to have lost its ring. North Branstons's attention, however, was not sufficiently disengaged to penetrate beyond the words themselves, and he answered briefly, "Yes," moving on as he spoke, as with a tacit understanding that Bryan would walk on with him.

Spells of silence were not usually in Bryan Armitage's line, but they had walked nearly the length of the street before he spoke again, and when he roused himself at last it was with an obvious effort.

"Well," he said lightly, "I don't suppose you are sorry to go. Alnchester isn't much of a place, after all. I suppose one does get rather narrow and stupid poked up in it. Sometimes I think I should like to get away myself."

There was a boyish dejection about the last sentences, and an obvious incapacity for detaching his mind from

his own affairs, against which the heavy reserve of North's silence struck oddly. Bryan Armitage plodded along, meditating for a minute or two, and then went on,—

"I think I should have had a try at getting away if you hadn't been going, North. I've always thought, don't you know, that you might have had no end of influence over her and put her straight all round, only somehow you don't seem quite to hit it off."

North turned his face towards his companion.

"Who is she?" he inquired.

Bryan Armitage coloured hotly.

"Oh, hadn't we mentioned her?" he said confusedly. "Connie, I meant, of course. Didn't I say Connie? If you had been going to stay I should have just given you a hint, and you'd have managed things a great deal better than I can. But as you're not, I suppose I'd better hold on. Not that she listens to a word I say, worse luck!"

The tone was very rueful and just a little unsteady.

"What's wrong with her?" said North indifferently.

"There's nothing wrong with her!" was the quick retort. "Not likely! Only——" He paused a moment and went on hesitatingly and confidentially: "She's got all sorts of rum notions, don't you know. Beastly place Girton must be! And she wants setting right all over the place."

North Branston's face grew a shade colder.

"I think you may safely leave her to her mother, Bryan," he said; "her views won't be allowed to materialize themselves, at any rate."

There was no answer, unless the sigh which proceeded from Bryan, weighted as it seemed with the trouble and responsibility of a universe, could be so called. They walked on in silence until they reached the end of the

road in which was Dr. Vallotson's house. Then Bryan Armitage stopped abruptly :

"Good-bye, old fellow," he said huskily.

"Won't you come in?" asked North in a surprised tone.

"No," was the hasty answer. "I—I can't."

He stopped a moment, and then broke out suddenly,—

"I say, North, I suppose it was awful cheek of me, but I proposed to—Connie, you know, at that confounded ball. And—and——"

"She refused you, I suppose?"

The question was brief enough, but it was not unsympathetic, and nothing was added to it on Bryan's hurried gesture of assent but the quick outstretching of North Branston's hand.

"Good-bye, old fellow!" said Bryan Armitage with a brave attempt at cheeriness. "I shall be after you soon, I dare say."

He turned away abruptly, and disappeared in the fast-falling twilight.

North Branston went on his way somewhat slowly, the air of preoccupation, broken for the moment by a touch of half-amused pity, settling upon him once more. He went into the house, and was going down the passage towards his own room, when he stopped and hesitated. Then, hearing a sound as of someone moving in the dining-room, he pushed open the door and went in. Constance was there alone, wearing her hat and jacket.

"Constance," said North Branston tersely, "give that note to your mother, please."

He held out a little square envelope as he spoke, but Constance did not take it.

"Oh, take it in yourself, North," she said rather impatiently. "I'm going out to tea, and I'm late as it is. Mother's only lying down in the drawing-room."

There was a moment's pause : North Branston neither assented nor refused. Then, as Constance continued severely, "You've not been in her room to-day," he cut her short, saying briefly, "Very well."

He was turning to leave the room when Constance called him back. Her eyes had fallen on a black-edged envelope lying on the table, and, as she lifted them again to North Branston, they were sharp with something that might have been described as curiosity, could such a sentiment have been ascribed to a regenerator of mankind.

"Put that card in the basket as you pass, North, will you?" she said. "I forgot it."

She pointed to the black-edged envelope on the table, watching North as he took it up mechanically. He looked at the direction on the envelope and paused a moment. But not the faintest change of expression was visible to Constance's eyes as he drew out the card, glanced at it, and carried it without comment out of the room. The card bore the words, "Lady Karslake," and added to the name, in Lady's Karslake's own handwriting, were the words, "With thanks for kind inquiries.—P.P.C." Through the address, "Hatherleigh Grange," a pen had been drawn.

North Branston strode down the passage to the table, on which stood the card-basket, and then stood for a moment looking down at the card in his hand with a half smile dawning about his mouth. It was the smile of a man who looks back at something in the past which the movement of life has left behind. It was cynical ; but it also suggested that the reminiscence in question had about it a certain halo of interest and charm. He dropped the card into the basket and turned towards the drawing-room.

As a reminiscence, and as a reminiscence only, had Lady Karslake any place in North Branston's thoughts.

Between the days, recent enough in point of time, when she had been an actual factor in his life—a hardly appreciated pleasure or refreshment—and the present, when she had passed utterly out of his sphere, there lay a great gulf; a gulf created by one of those sudden upheavals of long-smouldering natural forces by which the whole face of a landscape may be changed in the spiritual as in the natural world. In the stormy scene between himself and Mrs. Vallotson, interrupted by his summons to Hatherleigh Grange, the bonds which had warped his whole life, overstrained at last, had seemed suddenly to snap.

That scene, brief as it was, had burnt up all possibilities of his continued sojourn under Dr. Vallotson's roof. That departure which had hitherto been impossible to him had presented itself subsequently as an inevitable step in the natural course of events. He had made his preparations quietly and decidedly. His plans being matured, and an appointment in London having been applied for and obtained, he had announced the fact to Mrs. Vallotson as a foregone conclusion. A moment's dead silence had followed his announcement, to be succeeded by a curt word or two of assent; and neither in that interview nor in any other had any reference been made by either to the night of the Infirmary ball.

The link of outward circumstance was broken; the long bitterness of every-day contact was to be henceforward a thing of the past. North Branston was a free man now, as he had never been in all his life before. But his demeanour was marked by none of the elation, none, even, of the serenity which should naturally characterize a man thus liberated. The air of quiet well-being, which had pervaded him in the early days of his decision, had gradually worn away, to be replaced by the indifference which he had evinced during his parting interview with

Archdeacon French ; by the cold grimness with which he had passed through the Alnchester streets ; and by the accentuated bitterness which lurked about his mouth and eyes now, as he opened the door of the drawing-room and went in.

The room was very quiet ; there was, indeed, a curious hush over the whole house. Mrs. Vallotson lay on the sofa, her face turned from the door, still and peaceful. She was quite unoccupied, and the fact, in a woman so vigorous and stirring, was strikingly suggestive of absolute repose of mind and body. She stirred rather feebly as the door opened, and looked round. She saw North Branston, and her face changed suddenly and entirely ; it became constrained and sharp, and the constraint was reflected in the face of her visitor as he came slowly towards her. In the expression of neither was there any of that softened tolerance that should come of the recognition and abandonment of an overstrained position ; none of that sufferance which the prospect of a parting should make so easy.

She turned her head away, and drew the shawl with which she was wrapped close about her. She did not speak ; and North said, stiffly and formally,—

“ I hope you are better to-night, Adelaide ? ”

“ Yes, thank you.”

“ Mrs. Elliott has sent you this note ; Constance asked me to bring it to you.”

He handed her the envelope he held. She took it without looking at him, and let it lie beside her on the sofa.

“ Thank you,” she said. “ It is of no consequence.”

There was a moment's interval of silence ; then North Branston, rather as with a perfunctory sense of what it behoved him to do, under the circumstances, than on any spontaneous impulse, took up a position in front of the fire, and remarked,—

"It has been a wretched day."

"Yes."

"You have had no visitors, I suppose?"

The trivial conversationalism came oddly in his stiff, deep tones.

"No."

The monosyllable was abruptly, even irritably, spoken. But as she uttered it, Mrs. Vallotson also seemed to rouse herself to the conventional exigencies of the situation.

"I hope Jane has attended properly to your packing," she said.

"I believe so, thank you."

But as there are physical atmospheres in which no light can burn, so there are spiritual atmospheres in which no conversation can flourish. The words were followed by a frozen pause.

It was broken suddenly by Mrs. Vallotson. She had turned on her sofa, and was lying with her own face in shadow, and her black eyes fixed full upon North.

"Have you heard that Lady Karslake has left England?" she said.

North paused a minute; looking steadily towards her, though he could hardly see her face, the muscles round his mouth standing out distinctly.

"I have been told so," he said, "some twenty times in the course of the last two days."

"Have you heard it from herself?"

The voice rang out harsh and insistent; almost, as it seemed, beyond its owner's control. Again an instant passed before North Branston answered.

"No," he said.

She moved suddenly, as though to see his face better, bringing her own face into the full light of the lamp. He confronted her steadily with a white contempt stamped upon every feature, and their eyes met.

A moment later North Branston had turned on his heel abruptly, and had left the room. He went straight down the passage, shut himself in his own room, and set about some final preparations for his departure, his face set, his movements deliberate and concentrated—the movements of a man who keeps thought and feeling determinedly at bay.

The link of circumstances might break ; the link of every-day contact might cease to be ; but that other link, subtle, mysterious, by which this man and woman were held together, remained intact. The chain of antipathy held strong and unbroken. External freedom had come to North Branston ; yet—even as he realized the fact, even as he stepped out, as it were, from the bitter bondage in which he had dwelt—fate made her inexorable fiat felt, and he knew that he was in bondage still. The jars of daily life, the grinding discords of antagonistic temperament forced into constant contact, may be trivialities. But there is a degrading, all-pervading misery about the atmosphere which they create which lifts them to a position not theirs by right ; which sinks the cause in the effect ; making them seem themselves the evil of which they are only the result. During the past four months, the rub, the jar, the strain of North Branston's home life—hopelessly wretched before this period set in—had intensified to the last pitch of endurance ; it was but natural, therefore, that the personal contact had assumed for North Branston overshadowing proportions ; that he should look upon the cutting off of that contact as the very cutting of the Gordian knot. It was in this assurance that he had made all his arrangements for leaving Alnchester. It was in this assurance, and with that sense of calm well-being before alluded to, that the first few days of his freedom had gone by.

Whence there had come to him the vague conscious-

ness that that freedom was indeed an affair of externals only ; through what sense there dawned upon him a consciousness of the chain still about him, he could not have said. He brought the consciousness one day from Mrs. Vallotson's presence, and it never left him again. It grew steadily and inexorably. The chain, from being a mere shadowy possibility, became an ever-present weight, pressing relentlessly upon his inmost consciousness, to be removed or lightened by no human effort. His visits to Mrs. Vallotson's sick-room were few. But each seemed to be endowed with a power stretching far beyond the limits of the brief moments he spent in her company, and to rivet the chain faster and faster. She hated him, and he realized her hatred—realized it now that it stood shorn of all the dust and glamour of conflict and clash, as he had never done before. She hated him. Poisonous as is all hatred ; and it is a terrible truth that it is not less poisonous to the hated than to the hater ; there was something about the irrepressible repulsion that he still touched in her—something mysterious, unnatural, unexplained—which exercised a subtle influence over him. It created in him, involuntarily, almost against his will, a horrible reflection of itself. It penetrated him through and through ; withering every natural healthy impulse ; stultifying all his ambitions ; nourishing nothing that was not cynical and hard. The tangible bondage which lay behind had been bitter ; compared with the intangible bondage that had succeeded it, it had been ease.

North Branston and Mrs. Vallotson met only once more before his departure, and then they met to part. But few words passed on either side ; words chill and formal. The man went out into the world to do his own work in his own way ; the woman remained in her husband's home. And the chain remained unbroken.

CHAPTER XX.

THE furniture and appointments that constituted the claim of the room to the title of "furnished sitting-room" were all good of their kind, and in that inoffensive, if uninteresting, taste which has superseded in such apartments—in desirable neighbourhoods at least—the glaring hideousness of thirty years ago.

The room had, however, presumably been occupied by its present owner for some length of time, and the sign manual of that occupant's tastes and pursuits had subdued its original character into a mere background.

A great writing-table with pigeon-holed back, and drawers wherever drawers might be—a feature certainly never introduced by the original furnisher—was the most conspicuous object in the room. Ponderous-looking books seemed to fill every corner; on a table in one of the windows stood a large, brass-mounted microscope, and near the fireplace was an eminently practical-looking arm-chair. Stuck in the looking-glass over the chimney-piece were sundry cards of invitation.

The clock on the mantelshef pointed to ten minutes to three. It was a mild April day, one of the windows was open, and the soft spring-scented air stirred gently about the figure of the solitary occupant of the room, as he leaned back in the arm-chair before mentioned and finished a late luncheon with a cigarette. It was North Branston.

It was an older-looking man, and a harder-looking man than the North Branston who had left Alnchester two years before. The dark face had gained noticeably in power ; the lines of thought were more deeply graven on his forehead ; the deep-set eyes were keener and more penetrating. But the lines of thought were not the only lines with which time had dealt somewhat heavily. The old air of grim, passive endurance seemed to have slipped away, pressed out by the wear and work of daily life before an indescribable settling of the whole face. The contemptuous cynicism about his mouth, the coldness of his whole expression, no longer conveyed any suggestion of serving a defensive purpose ; they had developed uncompromisingly ; and nowhere in the face was there any trace of those pleasanter developments which should have softened and restrained them.

It was a less disagreeable face, inasmuch as its bitterness was less aggressive, more reserved and overlaid ; but it was a more disagreeable face, inasmuch as the possibilities which it contained were fewer.

He finished his cigarette slowly, his brows drawn together in an expression of thought which was rather that of a man whose habit it is to think deeply than of a man personally interested in his subject. Then he rose, glanced at the luncheon tray, and laid his hand on the bell. Before he had rung it, however, a short, assured rap fell on the door, and it opened quickly. It admitted a tall man, presumably of about five-and-fifty, with iron-grey hair, and well-cut features, keen and rather unsympathetic in expression. He wore the professional frock-coat, and there was that about him which marks the man who is "somebody" in his own line.

He greeted North Branston with a friendly nod.

"Thought I should find you, Branston," he said. "I

wanted to see you about that case in the accident ward. I've just been in to have a look at it."

"I would have waited if I had expected you," returned North.

"No consequence! It doesn't need me. From what Phillips tells me, you've made an excellent thing of it."

There was a cordial approval in the speaker's voice, and a certain respect dominated the latent patronage of his manner.

But North received the approbation without the slightest sign of satisfaction.

"I think we shall save it," he said.

"And it's a very remarkable case," pursued the other man; "so I thought I'd look in as I was passing, and give you a suggestion that occurred to me. Look here, have you thought of this?"

A brief technical colloquy ensued, and then the elder man turned to depart.

"All right," he said. "It's a point I had not considered. It's an interesting experiment at any rate; we may as well try it. By-the-bye," he stopped with his hand on the door. "They've offered you the lectureship, I hear."

"Yes."

"Good! I congratulate you! See you to-night?"

"Yes."

The elder man nodded approvingly and departed.

Left to himself, North Branston carried out his previous intention of ringing the bell, and then he sat down before his writing-table. He drew a letter out of an envelope, glanced through its contents, and wrote and directed a brief note.

Fortune, during the past two years, had been conspicuously kind to North Branston. The appointment

with which he had come to London had been resigned by him, in six months, in favour of a post in connection with the same hospital of a far more responsible and important nature. His recent visitor was Dr. Slade-Fenton, one of the best known medical men of the day, who combined with a large "society" practice an all important position in connection with the hospital to which North was attached. Dr. Slade-Fenton was Archdeacon French's brother-in-law. He had known something of North Branston in his earlier days, and on his reappearance in London he had quickly detected and appraised his more mature powers. He had found the younger man useful, and he had extended towards him that somewhat pushing patronage without the help of which even such abilities as North's may sometimes remain long unappreciated by the world at large. It was said in a good many quarters that a share in Dr. Slade-Fenton's practice, which would amount to a practical partnership, was open to North Branston if he should choose to accept it. Dr. Slade-Fenton was, indeed, very desirous that he should accept it: but, at present, private practice seemed to offer no attractions to North. And such time as was left him by his duties at the hospital he occupied with the literary and scientific sides of his profession. The letter which he had just written was an acceptance of an important lectureship which had never before been offered to so young a man. North Branston, at thirty-three, was on the high-road to a position of singular prominence in his profession.

There was no suggestion of elation about him, however, as he stamped his envelope and put it on one side for the post. Nor did his expression change at all, as will the expression of a man interrupted in a train of personally interesting thought, when the door was again opened by the servant. He turned his head mechanically.

"I beg pardon, sir," said the woman, "there's a gentleman downstairs. I told him that I thought you were busy, sir, but he says he's quite sure you will see him. Mr. Bryan Armitage, he told me to say."

The woman's manner witnessed to the fact that North Branston was by no means patient of interruption by visitors. He glanced at the clock as she finished speaking, and then said tersely,—

"Ask him to come up."

The woman disappeared, and a minute or two later, Bryan Armitage entered the room. He came eagerly towards North with outstretched hand.

"How are you, North?" he exclaimed. "It is luck to find you in. You don't seem to encourage visitors, though! I was received as though I were no end of a phenomenon. How are you? I say, what an age it is since we met, and how glad I am to see you!"

He was shaking North's hand by this time with a grip that seemed loth to loosen itself; but North Branston rather allowed than returned the enthusiastic hand-shake as he said, with no quickening or warming of his deep, cold tones,—

"How are you, Armitage? What are you doing in town? Sit down."

Bryan, tacitly accepting the invitation, glanced at him with a touch of half-disappointed surprise in his eyes.

"Oh, you haven't heard, then?" he said. "I thought they might perhaps have mentioned it in your Alnchester letters. I am transferred. My uncle has got me into one of the big London firms, and they are sending me abroad."

"That means promotion, I suppose," said North.

Bryan Armitage made a rather hurried gesture of negation.

"Not particularly," he said. "I—I wanted a change."

He went on in a lighter tone, and as though passing to a subject more likely to be interesting to his interlocutor,—

"I called on Mrs. Vallotson to say good-bye a day or two before I came away, but I expect you've heard since then and your news is later than mine. I hope they're all well."

North Branston had seated himself in his writing-table chair, and he now leaned back, crossing his legs and folding his arms as he said impassively,—

"I hear from Alnchester very occasionally. They were all right, I suppose, when you came away?"

For the first time something in North Branston's voice and manner seemed to arrest Bryan Armitage's attention. He looked for a moment rather dubiously at North. And in the pause, and in the half-perplexed, half-attentive expression which crossed his face, certain changes which the past year had wrought upon his boyishness became for the moment strikingly apparent. Bryan Armitage seemed to have grown far more than two years older. The old buoyancy of his spirits seemed to have left him; his voice, in spite of the boyish phrases that still appeared here and there in his talk, had a graver and more manly ring. The twinkle and sparkle of irrepressible humour still lurked in his eyes, but it seemed to be temporarily overlaid with a certain wistful sadness.

"Oh, yes," he said rather slowly. "They—Mrs. Vallotson was quite well. Everybody says she's looking wonderfully well, and Dr. Vallotson, too."

"And Constance?" North shot a glance at his visitor, half amused, half contemplative in its mingling of recollection and penetration. "You've got over that little disappointment by this time, I hope, Armitage?"

Bryan coloured a deep, painful red.

"I'm not that sort, North," he said hurriedly. "It wasn't that kind of affair with me. But Constance is not at home just now. Didn't you know that?"

North shook his head indifferently, and Bryan went on with a kind of hesitating confidence,—

"She's been away since Christmas, staying with some people in the country. I'm awfully sorry to say there was a row, though I did my best. And Mrs. Vallotson thought—well, she was rather sent away, don't you see?"

He spoke in a low, pained voice, not looking at North; and he did not see the slight smile with which the latter regarded him.

"A row?" he observed. "What about?"

"Oh, Connie had plans, you know. We won't trot them out, I think."

A vague sense of the total want of sympathy in the tone of the question seemed to be influencing Bryan as he glanced, half defiantly, half wistfully, at North.

"She wanted to stir things up a bit in Alnchester, and I couldn't hold her in. Of course I gave myself away a bit over what happened before you left, or I might have managed better. And—well, Mrs. Vallotson didn't quite see her plans, and Connie didn't see giving them up. That was all."

"Ah!"

North Branston did not smile as he uttered this laconic comment. His face was dark and sardonic. Then he seemed to return to the consideration of his visitor's affairs.

"You've not had a particularly pleasant winter, then, I conclude?"

A quick, short sigh came from Bryan, contrasting oddly, as did his tone, with the boyish frankness of his words,—

"I've had a brute of a time," he said. "It wouldn't matter if it were not such a girl as Connie ; but to see her spoiling herself with cranks, and not to be able to make her see that they are cranks, put it which way you will—is—is simply beastly, don't you know."

"So you've come away to avoid the spectacle?"

The careless amusement of North's tone seemed to penetrate straight through Bryan's simple confidence. He paused a moment and looked his host straight in the face.

"I've come away because I couldn't do any good," he said. "I believe I only make things worse, and I don't hold with moping and dawdling because one can't get what one wants."

The words implied a good deal more than was actually said, and perhaps the speaker thought that they implied even more than they did ; for he coloured, having uttered them, and subsided into silence.

North received the speech with absolute placidity, and the conversation being thus thrown into his hands, seemed to have hardly sufficient impetus in himself either to pursue the original topic or to produce a new one. Eventually he said, apparently simply for the sake of saying something,—

"You said you were going abroad, didn't you? When and where?"

With a promptitude that showed his readiness to respond to any sign of interest on North's part, Bryan roused himself.

"To Constantinople," he said, "I shall be off next week, I expect. I should have looked you up before this if I hadn't been tied very closely at the bank. I've been looking forward to it awfully. One of the things I've principally thought of in coming to London, is seeing something of you, North, after these two years."

He stopped, and then continued with a rather forced cheeriness,—

“London’s an uncommonly dreary place somehow, when you don’t know any one—even when you’re hard at work. You never went through that, of course ; you had heaps of friends when you came up.”

He spoke a little wistfully, and then—North receiving his words in silence which did not tend to promote conversation—he rose. There was an air of disappointment about him.

“You’re busy, I expect,” he said hesitatingly ; he seemed to be struggling valiantly against a consciousness which he would not recognize. “Perhaps I’d better be off. I—I rather thought that you might have been able to come out for a walk. Never mind, I must go alone.”

There was a cheery holding at bay of the rather dreary prospect that evidently unfolded itself before him, which seemed to influence North almost in spite of himself.

“What are you doing this evening ?” he said carelessly, as he, too, rose.

The visitor stared.

“Doing ? Oh, smoking and reading a bit, I suppose,” he returned, in a voice that was evidently determined not to be rueful.

“You don’t seem to look forward to it.”

“Well, not particularly, perhaps,” with a laugh ; “it gets a trifle dull.”

“I could take you to an affair that would be a good deal duller, if you like—a party at the Slade-Fentons’. Mrs. Slade-Fenton is a sister of Archdeacon French’s, at Alnchester, you know. It’s a fashionable-intellectual affair, but it might amuse you.”

There was a world of contempt for the affair in question in North Branston’s tone, but Bryan Armitage did not

notice it. The cloud had cleared from his face as if by magic, and his honest blue eyes were full of gratitude and enthusiasm.

"I should like it no end," he said. "I say, North, it is good of you. Wouldn't it bore you, though? It would be capital fun."

"I assure you it won't," said North. "But if you like to be here at nine o'clock, you can prove the fact for yourself. It's an early affair."

Bryan Armitage was not afflicted either with shyness or self-consciousness in any form. He was an eminently sociable soul, and when he reappeared at North's room at nine o'clock that evening, punctual to the moment, he was in high spirits; in spirits so high, indeed, and so permeated with warm-hearted cordiality, as to suggest an even violent reaction from the constraint of the morning.

"They're awful swells, aren't they—the Slade-Fentons?" he said, as their hansom turned into the street, in a most fashionable locality, in which the Slade-Fentons lived.

"They go in for society—yes," replied North tersely.

"Will there be a lot of people there to-night?"

North smiled rather grimly.

"Not what Mrs. Slade-Fenton would call a lot of people," he said. "It's the fashion to be 'cultured' just at present. Mrs. Slade-Fenton is going in for a series of debating evenings—topics of the day. This is one of them. I told you it would be dull."

The bald explanation was received with a moment's puzzled silence. Then Bryan said in a tone of keen curiosity,—

"It will be no end new, whatever it may be besides. I say, here we are!"

The cab had stopped, and a few minutes later Bryan

found himself following North, up the staircase of such a house as his unsophisticated eyes had never beheld, into the presence of his hostess.

Mrs. Slade-Fenton was not a tall woman, but she was amply and firmly developed, and carried herself with an air of self-conscious distinction. Her features were plain, but they were cleverly redeemed from insignificance by the abundance of red hair which she wore turned back from her forehead. This eminently becoming hair taken in conjunction with her well-preserved face made her look far less than forty-five years. And combined with the rich and brilliant style of dress which she affected, it had procured her a reputation as a "fine-looking woman."

Mrs. Slade-Fenton was a woman, belonging to a large class, troubled with no inconveniently high perceptions, but gifted with considerable shrewdness and a keen eye for the main chance. The main chance, with Mrs. Slade-Fenton, was represented by that social prestige, that keeping of themselves well before their world, which she and her husband, in a practical, up-to-date fashion, recognized as being necessary to Dr. Slade-Fenton's professional well-being. And she had cultivated a position in society with ever-increasing resource and success for nearly fifteen years. It was a hobby with her to pose as one having a footing, so to speak, in two worlds—the world of fashion and the world of intellect. In the fashionable set to which she belonged, her assumption of intellectual proclivities had gone far towards individualizing her. In the intellectual set, the cultivation of which was quite as necessary from a business point of view, the position which the Slade-Fentons held in society conferred upon them an undefined but quite undeniable distinction.

Frivolity having, as the century draws to a close, ceased to hold the fashionable field; and intellectuality

of all kinds having become the thing ; Mrs. Slade-Fenton, like a thorough woman of business, saw her opportunity and closed with it. The time had come for such a judicious amalgamation of her worlds as would cause a sensation in each. The present occasion represented such an amalgamation, having for its object the discussion of a social question recently started in one of the advanced magazines ; and Mrs. Slade-Fenton was in her element.

Bryan Armitage's modest composure was not easily to be upset ; but as he made his bow he was distinctly excited and even a little thrilled. The house and all its appointments " made a fellow feel so small," as he afterwards expressed it ; he had caught a glimpse in the drawing-rooms beyond of faces known to him only, hitherto, through the pages of the illustrated papers ; and his hostess herself, arrayed in deep violet velvet and old lace, and further endued with her most intellectual demeanour, was a presence calculated to inspire a respect not untouched with awe.

He heard North Branston's introduction of him, and the few words of explanation with which it was supplemented ; words spoken with the indifferent assurance of a man confident as to his ground ; with a rather curious expression stealing over his face. And the gracious reception accorded him deepened that expression.

" I am charmed to see you," said Mrs. Slade-Fenton. " Dr. Branston is quite at home here, and any friend of his is welcome." She turned to North as she finished with a manner which seemed to take possession of him in a matter-of-course fashion. " Let me see," she said. " Will Mr. Armitage care to speak ? No ?"—as Bryan interposed a hurried disclaimer, " Then we must see that he is established in good company. Olive ! Where is Olive ? By-the-bye, I hear that it is all right about

the lectureship, Dr. Branston. A thousand congratulations."

The words were spoken in an interested, well-satisfied tone, and Bryan glanced at North, wondering as to the subject of congratulation.

"Thanks," said North briefly.

"You'll speak to-night, won't you? Now, you really must. Ah, here is Olive. You must settle it with her."

A tall, dark girl—not handsome but very well and strikingly dressed—was holding out her hand to North with a brilliant smile.

"Congratulations," she said. "Any quantity of them. You'll be in your element as a lecturer, Dr. Branston. I judge by your ever-expressive silence! Seriously, though, every one is delighted."

"Dr. Branston must be made to speak to-night," said Mrs. Slade-Fenton decisively. "It is quite his night. I put him in your charge, Olive. But first I want you to take care of his friend—Mr. Armitage, Miss Kenderdine. Introduce Mr. Armitage to some pleasant people and see that he has a good place."

Miss Kenderdine was evidently not a young woman of dawdling proclivities. She took stock of the individual thus commended to her care; appraised him, presumably, as uninteresting; and then said to him, with a little smile and gesture of temporary farewell to North,—

"Suppose we go into the other room, then?"

To say that Bryan Armitage acquitted himself as creditably as he might have done during the ten minutes that followed, would be wholly untrue. But the previous five minutes had provided him with sundry new ideas, which entirely prevented his rising to the occasion. He was introduced to some half-dozen people as "Dr. Branston's friend," a formula which never failed to act as a passport; and then Miss Kenderdine paused.

"You will do now, I think," she said lightly. "And I must go. You will find this an excellent place."

She turned away with an easy, supercilious little nod ; and Bryan Armitage watched her cross the room to where North Branston stood, button-holed by a distinguished political economist.

Further conversation was not expected of Dr. Branston's friend, but he used his eyes and ears throughout the evening with ever-deepening interest ; and he used them to such purpose that when he finally found himself outside the house, and alone with North, he walked the whole length of the street in total silence.

Silence had apparently become North Branston's natural element, and he made no attempt to break it in this instance. It was Bryan who eventually said abruptly,—

"Who is Miss Kenderdine !"

"She is a cousin of Slade-Fenton's. She lives with them."

There was another pause.

"Do you—you consider her a good-looking girl, I suppose ?"

North Branston glanced round at his companion, a cynical little smile curling his lips.

"Are you smitten, by boy?" he said. "Waste of pains, I assure you !"

The young man flushed to the roots of his hair.

"Smitten !" he cried. "I? And with a girl like that? Why, she's a regular out-and-out society woman ! I don't believe there's a bit of—of gentleness or anything of that kind in her !"

A slight laugh came from North, and Bryan Armitage stopped abruptly. The colour left his face as though with the consciousness of having made a dreadful mistake ; and for quite a moment he stared blankly before

him without making any attempt to speak. Then he faltered,—

"I—I beg your pardon, North. I'm the biggest fool alive! I—I beg your pardon!"

The cigar which North had lighted paused suddenly in its passage to his lips. Then it proceeded on its way.

"I'm not prepared to argue as to your mental status! But why beg my pardon?"

The words were spoken with the utmost deliberation, and Bryan received them with an awkward laugh.

"I suppose I'm only putting my foot into it worse," he said ruefully. "I suppose it isn't—you don't—— But you see, old fellow, coming in from outside with nothing to do but to look on, I couldn't help seeing how things are."

"How what things are?"

"Why, hang it all, North, you're rather hard on a man—you and Miss Kenderdine, of course." He stopped. "I—I suppose it's as good as settled?" he added tentatively and wistfully.

There was a moment's silence, and then North smiled.

"Yes," he said, "it's quite settled. I'm not a marrying man."

With a start of astonishment, not to be reduced to words, Bryan Armitage looked at his companion as though doubting the evidence of his ears. He looked away, looked back again, murmured vaguely, "I beg your pardon!" and then relapsed into total silence.

They reached the place where their ways parted with that silence unbroken, and again it was Bryan who broke it at last. He came to a standstill, with his eyes fixed on North, a puzzled and distressed expression standing out in them in strong relief.

"North," he said in an odd, gentle tone, "I'd no idea,

until to-night, that you were such a swell. I shan't see you again before I go away, I expect, and I should just like to say this, if you don't mind. I dare say I shouldn't have anderstood all it meant, but I—I wish you had told me about that lectureship. I—should like to have congratulated you."

As though that tone in Bryan's voice had touched, quite suddenly, something in North Branston of the very existence of which its owner was unconscious, his eyes softened strangely and involuntarily.

"You're quite mistaken," he said quickly. "I did not think of it ; that was all !"

"You did not think of it !"

There was a moment's pause as North shook his head. Then Bryan, with his face more puzzled than ever, held out his hand impulsively.

"You'll let me say, I'm glad with all my heart," he said simply.

North Branston wrung his hand in a sudden, genuine grip.

"Thank you, Bryan, boy," he said.

His tone was hard no longer, but it was penetrated through and through with a deep, unconscious sadness.

CHAPTER XXI.

MISS KENDERDINE was dressing for the evening, and Miss Kenderdine was obviously out of humour. The maid sent by Mrs. Slade-Fenton to offer her services had felt her heart sink as her eyes rested upon the young lady's countenance; and her foreboding was amply justified by the events of the subsequent half-hour. Consideration for the servants was not the rule in the Slade-Fenton household. On the present occasion nothing that the maid did or said being right in Miss Kenderdine's eyes, the woman was informed of the fact at every opportunity with a careless, contemptuous insolence which was scornfully oblivious of the humiliation inflicted, and which seemed to serve as a safety valve for Miss Kenderdine's temper.

The result of the toilet was eminently unsatisfactory. The maid having been dismissed with a final cutting exposition of this fact, Miss Kenderdine confronted her own reflection in a long glass, and realized with a fresh access of ill-humour that she was very far from looking her best. Her commonplace, rather thin features, passable enough under the daring vivacity of expression which usually lighted them up, looked plain and unpleasant. Her brilliantly clad figure—rather too thin at the best of times—had a sullen set, and lacked that dash and assurance of carriage which was its dominant characteristic. She turned away from the glass with a

quick, caustic gesture and a muttered ejaculation of indifference.

Mrs. Slade-Fenton was already in the drawing-room when Miss Kenderdine entered. She looked up as the younger woman came in ; then her eyebrows moved sharply as she contemplated Miss Kenderdine for a second or two, and looked away again without comment.

The two ladies were dining alone ; they were going afterwards to a very select little "at home," at which Dr. Slade Fenton would join them. A week had elapsed since Mrs. Slade Fenton's debating party.

Whether or no Miss Kenderdine would have made some slight attempt at the concealment of her humour had Dr. Slade-Fenton been present during dinner, is an open question. So far from making any such attempt for the edification of his wife, she seemed deliberately to display her ill-temper. Such contributions as she made to the conversation were brusque and captious in tone, and except when Mrs. Slade-Fenton's remarks demanded a response she sat in silence. After that first glance, Mrs. Slade-Fenton seemed to become entirely oblivious of anything unusual in her companion's appearance or manner. The presence of the servants necessarily prevented any allusion to it, and it was not until the two were seated side by side in the brougham, rolling rapidly along the streets, that the elder lady said warily,—

"What is the matter, Olive?"

Miss Kenderdine, staring angrily out of her window, drummed impatiently upon the cushioned ledge.

"If you want to know, Helen, I've had enough," she said brusquely, almost defiantly.

"Enough of what!"

"Enough of—of playing a losing game. Oh, you know what I mean perfectly well, Helen. It's not worth the candle."

There was a note in her voice half angry, half contemptuous.

"You're speaking of Dr. Branston, I suppose?" said Mrs. Slade-Fenton, with perfect composure. "He is a little difficult, certainly—that kind of man often is. But it is foolish to talk like that. I have said from the first—and you quite agreed with me, Olive—that he is just the man for you. His position is quite worth having even now; and in another ten years he will be at the top of the tree. What more do you want?"

"What he wants seems to be almost as much to the purpose," retorted Miss Kenderdine, with a laugh. "I don't believe he means to marry, Helen."

"He must marry," was the decisive answer. "It is absolutely necessary in his position, particularly if Ralph gets him into the practice. He'll soon find that out. And, if you don't get him, some one else will—that's all."

"Some one else may, then! He's too much trouble for me!"

The words were fired out with exceedingly spiteful emphasis, and Mrs. Slade-Fenton drew herself up and regarded her companion with sharp disapproval.

"Really, Olive," she said crisply, "you are talking like a child—and a very stupid child, too. Do you expect to get all you want in the world without taking trouble for it? Do you suppose that anything so obviously suitable as this is likely to present itself again in a hurry? I don't want to say unpleasant things, but you must really remember that you don't get any younger! You're very popular and attractive, of course. But still—popular women don't always marry."

Perhaps Miss Kenderdine's feelings had worked themselves off to some extent in her recent explosion; perhaps Mrs. Slade-Fenton's reasoning appealed to her common

sense. The angry defiance of her pose relaxed a little; she leaned back in her place and said, in a more argumentative tone,—

"I'm quite as much annoyed as you can be, Helen. I rather like him, and he is so certain to get on. But, really, it doesn't seem to me to be good enough. I don't believe it's the faintest use."

"He behaves very well to you. He spoke the other night when you urged him to do so. Several people noticed you together, and asked me when it would be settled."

Miss Kenderdine laughed scornfully.

"Really, Helen," she said, "it is you who are foolish to use that as an argument when you are behind the scenes. As to his speaking, he only did it because it was less trouble than refusing."

"Give it another chance, at any rate," urged Mrs. Slade-Fenton emphatically. "See what happens to-night. Don't, pray, do anything foolish."

"I won't do anything foolish," returned Miss Kenderdine brusquely. "But I don't feel at all inclined to exert myself, and I tell you so frankly, Helen!"

Habit, as every one knows, is second nature. It was by no means Miss Kenderdine's habit to content herself with that very subordinate position in society which would have been hers but for her dashing and attention-compelling manners; and, ten minutes later, she was making one of a brilliant crowd in a brilliant drawing-room without a trace about her of that sullen ill-temper which she seemed to have put off with her cloak. The cloud had vanished from her face, and it was full of life and energy; her gesture and carriage were free and animated, and, if a caustic touch still lurked in her tongue, it only served to give an added flavour and originality to her talk.

She was the centre of a little group of more or less nervously delighted young men, when her quick eyes lighted on North Branston just entering the room. She nodded carelessly, and then, still talking and laughing, watched him without appearing to do so, as he moved through the room exchanging greetings and fragments of conversation until he came in due course to Mrs. Slade-Fenton. Then, after a moment or two, she saw him turn, evidently in response to a request from that lady, and make his way in her own direction.

Miss Kenderdine's expression grew rather hard, and she held out her hand as he approached with a brusque gesture.

"Good evening," she said, and there was a suggestion or perfunctoriness about the cordiality of her tone. "You've arrived just too soon, Dr. Branston. Oh, you've brought me my fan—thanks. All the same, you're a spoil-sport. We were overhauling the faults and follies of our acquaintances, and we were just coming to you."

She glanced carelessly round at her little group of listeners with a laugh.

There was something about North Branston's face; something which had developed almost imperceptibly as he moved through the crowd; something which strengthened as he listened to Miss Kenderdine's flippant, biting tones, before which all such finer lines as the past year had left seemed to sink into abeyance. There was a contempt about his mouth which was no longer the contempt which dismisses, but the contempt which subscribes to and accepts the thing scorned. His eyes were pitilessly observant of the woman before him, and their cynicism was that which has lost touch with cynicism's only excuse—a bitter sense of better things withheld or unattainable.

"I would not spoil such sport for the world. Shall I go away?" he said, with careless irony.

"He had better stay and listen, Miss Kenderdine. It'll do him no end of good," put in a young man, laughing. And he added in an undertone to the man next him: "By Jove, he would hardly know himself by the time she had done with him!"

Miss Kenderdine ignored the suggestion, and addressed herself exclusively to North Branston.

"No," she said; "you needn't go. On the whole, I think we won't meddle with you. You're too beastly successful, as the boys say. Also, when it comes to saying nasty things of people, I rather admire you; you do it so well. So I think we'll make common cause."

"But if you come to fighting shy of the successful fellows, there's no fun in it," objected another man. "What's the good of taking off a fellow if he isn't worth taking off?"

Miss Kenderdine just glanced at him; but though she answered his question she practically addressed North Branston, and the group began to melt away.

"Dr. Branston is in the transition stage," she said. "Quite big enough to make the cutting up process unpleasant for the performer, and not quite bloated enough to be lazy about it. The transition stage will last a very short time, and then we shall be able to get our knives in."

She laughed spitefully, and then said, again with that perfunctory touch about her manner,—

"How did the first lecture go off?"

North Branston had entered upon his duties in connection with his lectureship on the previous day.

"Oh, very well," he said callously, almost arrogantly. "Are you anxious to estimate its place in the bloating process, Miss Kenderdine? There was the usual amount

of applause and the usual amount of congratulation, which is quite the right kind of food."

The rest of the group had drifted away, and the two were practically alone.

"It's part of the diet," returned Miss Kenderdine flippantly; "but taken alone it produces rather a temporary state of inflation. Coin of the realm is the outward and visible sign of success nowadays—it always has been, no doubt—and genuine success is not, where coin of the realm is not. An artistic success is the polite for failure. Don't flatter yourself that congratulations will go on for ever unless you show practical proofs of having deserved them."

North received the words with a careless gesture of assent.

"Financial proofs are obviously unimpeachable," he said, "and they have the further advantage of intrinsic charm."

Miss Kenderdine paused, and looked at him over her fan.

"I hope you take that fact into consideration," she said drily, and with a certain significance, "when you weigh the advantage of a ready-made practice."

North Branston did not resent the intrusiveness of the remark. He appeared to take it as the merest matter of course.

"You are an excellent woman of business, Miss Kenderdine," he said. "Don't do me the injustice to suppose—"

His voice, at its thinnest, hardest, and most cold-blooded, stopped suddenly. His glance, leaving Miss Kenderdine's face, had strayed indifferently enough across the room; and on the other side of the room something, presumably, of which he had caught a glimpse through the constantly shifting crowd, seemed to have arrested

his attention. A curious expression—the expression of a man who finds himself, as with a flash and without volition on his own part, confronted with a violent contrast—passed across his face ; he paused, the expression subsided, leaving his face slightly and indefinitely altered ; and he began his sentence again.

“Pray, don’t imagine,” he said, “that I should leave such a factor—”

His eyes had wandered again to that other side of the room where his attention had been caught before ; and again he stopped. This time the movement of the crowd had made one of those open spaces which appear so unaccountably in the fullest room ; and beyond it, sitting on a low seat pushed back into an angle of the wall, was Lady Karslake.

She was in black still ; the sombre, unrelieved black of mourning. But there was no other sign about her attire of her widowhood. She was listening to an elderly man who stood talking beside her ; but she was not looking at him. She was fanning herself with slow, regular movements of a great black fan, and looking across it with a slight, hardly developed smile straight at North Branston. She met his glance and bowed.

North Branston returned her bow hurriedly, almost stiffly. Then he turned brusquely to his companion. His expression had developed. He looked like a man who, in the light of the contrast forced upon him, sees himself arraigned, against his will.

“Have you had some supper, Miss Kenderdine ? ” he said. “May I have the pleasure of taking you down ? ”

“Who is your friend ? ” returned Miss Kenderdine coolly.

With one sharp glance at him she had followed the direction of his eyes, and was now staring—as perhaps only a woman of Miss Kenderdine’s type can stare—at

Lady Karslake. There was a moment's interval before North Branston answered.

"She is a Lady Karslake. You may have heard of her late husband, Sir William Karslake."

"Oh!" Miss Kenderdine prolonged her stare in silence for a moment, and then added carelessly: "Where have you met her?"

"At Alnchester," returned North curtly.

In spite of himself, in defiance, as it seemed, of his intentions, his eyes strayed once more as he spoke towards the slender, graceful figure on the other side of the room; and in that instant Lady Karslake smiled again, and made a little movement with her fan.

"She wants to speak to you apparently!" said Miss Kenderdine, with an unpleasant laugh. Her expression had changed surprisingly in the course of the last few seconds.

"I have not had the pleasure of meeting Lady Karslake for two years," said North, calmly. "Will you excuse me, Miss Kenderdine?" and he turned and made his way across the room.

Lady Karslake held out her hand, as he drew near, with a graceful little gesture of welcome.

"Well met!" she said. "I heard you were here, Dr. Branston. So you have taken my advice?"

He made a quick, non-committal movement, and met the clear eyes which were scanning his face with his own eyes sombre and impenetrable.

"It is very kind of you to remember me, Lady Karslake," he said, apparently for the sake of saying something.

She paused a moment, looking at him.

"Is that a pretty speech?" she said. "You have learned something in London, then!" She rose. "I was just going when I caught sight of you," she said.

"Come and see me, Dr. Branston, will you? I'm in Wilton Street, number thirteen. Come to tea on Sunday, can you?"

"Thanks, I shall be delighted!"

She waited while he wrote the address in his pocket-book, and then held out her hand.

"Au revoir!" she said.

"Au revoir, Lady Karslake!"

CHAPTER XXII.

"I HAVE given you Dr. Branston, Olive !"

Olive Kenderdine fastened her bracelet over the long glove which she had just drawn on with a decided snap.

"Very well," she said briefly, "that's all right."

She walked across the brilliantly lighted drawing-room as she spoke, to a long mirror, in which she inspected herself critically. She was very carefully and becomingly dressed in a dinner-dress that showed her tall figure to conspicuous advantage ; and about her tone, expression and manner alike, there was an all-pervading resolution. Mrs. Slade-Fenton glanced across at her approvingly.

"You seem to have changed your mind," she remarked.

"Yes," was the concise answer ; "I have." She paused a moment, and then said abruptly : "I don't see that you need have asked that friend of the Henleys for to-night, Alice !"

Mrs. Slade-Fenton put up her long-handled eye-glasses.

"Lady Karslake?" she said carelessly. "I was obliged to ask her some time or other. Why not to-night?"

Miss Kenderdine laughed unpleasantly.

"Oh, no reason," she said ; "only it isn't always a desirable thing under the circumstances, to invite old acquaintances to the same party. She's an old acquaintance of Dr. Branston's."

"Yes," said Mrs. Slade-Fenton. "So I understand."

She spoke somewhat absently, and her lips were just parted to speak again when Miss Kenderdine came towards her, saying callously,—

"It doesn't matter! She has put a touch of spice into a flat affair. Thank heaven for that!"

The door opened as she finished speaking to admit the master of the house, shrewd, convincing, irreproachable as usual, in dress and manner; and close upon his entrance followed the announcement of the first guests.

The subdued hum of before dinner conversation was filling the drawing-room; nine out of the eleven guests expected had arrived, and Olive Kenderdine was nonchalantly watching the door when it opened to admit North Branston.

Before his reception by his hostess was over, Miss Kenderdine, with an easy assumption or the manner of daughter or sister of the house—which she was wont to put off and on as suited her convenience—had disengaged herself from the group she had been entertaining, and was ready to welcome the new-comer.

"You are to take me in," she said familiarly. "I may as well break it to you at once. Why were you not at the Montagues' last night, Dr. Branston?"

Her manner to him differed conspicuously from her manner at the party at which he had met Lady Karslake four nights before. The spiteful indecision which had pervaded it then was replaced by a hard friendliness which was Miss Kenderdine's substitute for an ingratiating manner.

But if her demeanour and expression were altered, North's were not.

"I was not at the Montagues'," he said, "because I was at the Bartons'."

"A mistake!" retorted Miss Kenderdine audaciously. "The Montagues are far more useful people."

He made a gesture of assent.

"Of course," he said carelessly. "But these things will happen occasionally." He glanced round the room. "We seem to be waiting," he said. "Who is it?"

Miss Kenderdine unfurled her fan.

"An acquaintance of yours," she said. "Lady Karlake. People who protract this gruesome quarter of an hour ought to be smothered!"

At the same moment the door opened, and Lady Karlake was announced. She came in, graceful and self-possessed, and the pair between whom her name had just been uttered paused with the instinct natural to the circumstances, and watched her entrance. This time her appearance brought no change to North Branston's face.

"Rather a pretty woman," said Miss Kenderdine carelessly. "How long is it since her husband died?"

"About two years," answered North. Lady Karlake, catching sight of him across the room, had given him a bow and a smile, and he returned the bow as he spoke.

"Has she been in retirement all this time?" commented the girl, with a sneer. "He was much older than she, wasn't he? I suppose she married him for his money."

"I really cannot tell you," returned North. "Most marriages have something of the kind behind them, I suppose!"

He had offered her his arm, and they were following in the procession of couples towards the dining-room. She looked round at him sharply, and answered,—

"Oh, I suppose so. And after all, why not? If marriage were a temporary arrangement one might afford to be sentimental over it. But its permanency renders it necessary to remember that there are more

important things in life than sentiment. We are on the other side of the table, Dr. Branston, near the bottom."

She slipped her hand out of his arm as she gave him this direction, and preceded him round the room, looking back at him over her shoulder. It was not until she had reached the first of the two vacant chairs, for which she had instinctively been making, that she looked towards it. As she did so the couple beyond came for the first time within her line of sight. She did not pause in her speech, but a quick flush, as of surprise and annoyance, coloured her whole face, and she cast one expressive glance at Mrs. Slade-Fenton. Separated from her hostess by the man who had brought her in, and next the chair which was to be North Branston's, sat Lady Karslake.

Lady Karslake looked up with a smile as the owner of the empty chair took possession, drawing in the train of her dress for his greater convenience.

"We are neighbours!" she said. "That is pleasant."

The Eve Karslake of to-day was thinner than the Eve Karslake of two years ago; people who were not fond of her added to this dictum a comment to the effect that she was also older-looking. Her features, always delicately moulded, had lost their roundness of contour, and had indeed, in so doing, acquired that peculiar refinement of outline which is not consistent with any suggestion of youth. There were no traces of age about her beautiful eyes, but they had acquired—perhaps merely from the sharper chiselling of the other features—something which they had not known two years before. It was something hardly to be defined, as it looked out of her eyes alone; but there were moments of repose, nowadays, when her face seemed to fall into faint lines which were wholly new to it; which were not exactly lines of weariness, disappointment, or dissatisfac-

tion ; but which vaguely suggested now one, now another, of these feelings. And in such moments the expression of her eyes revealed itself as a wistful satiety.

Her tone to North Branston, now, was that of the simplest society friendliness, and, having thus greeted him, she turned to the man to whom her attention was due.

"What were we talking about ? " said Miss Kenderdine on North's other side. There was an assumption or carelessness in her tone which by no means concealed the strong access of acerbity which had affected it since she spoke last.

"I am quite prepared to follow your lead," was the composed and uninterested reply.

"That's very valiant of you," she retorted. "Doesn't it occur to you that it may be an unwise thing to give a woman her head with such a statement as that ! Suppose I were to take advantage of it ? "

Perhaps the indifference with which North Branston, judging from his expression, contemplated such a possibility, stimulated Miss Kenderdine to carry out the threat contained in her words. Certainly when two-thirds of the long dinner had gone by, she had shown no signs of flagging in the provision of those same conversational leads. She talked exclusively to North Branston, and she talked incessantly. It was clever talk enough, characterized by all the surface wit, shrewdness, and brilliancy of a capable woman of the world, and North Branston listened and replied, putting in those caustic observations which responded to her humour.

"Have you seen the latest contribution to the education question ? "

Miss Kenderdine passed to the question from a biting summary of the last new novel, and helped herself to ice- pudding as she spoke. At the same time the conversa-

tion on North's other hand, which had been carried on more or less generally between Lady Karslake and her cavalier, Mrs. Slade-Fenton and the man on her other side, drifted away from Lady Karslake ; and the slender figure at North's side sat in disengaged silence, the expressive faced turned slightly and carelessly in his direction.

"Yes," said North, a contemptuous smile touching his lips as he answered Miss Kenderdine. She had referred to a magazine article by a well-known philanthropist, which was being a good deal talked about. "It is just what one would expect from the man."

"Do you imagine that he believes in all his beautiful theories, or is it an ingenious form of self-advertisement ?"

North Branston shrugged his shoulders.

"Impossible to say. There is a good deal of advertisement connected with it, at least."

"Ah, Dr. Branston, I must take up the cudgels ! I have an admiration for the man you are maligning !"

It was Lady Karslake who spoke. Her voice, musical and low, had taken up the word with the perfect composure of a woman who can commit, and commit gracefully, breaches of etiquette which other women could hardly manage successfully. She paused a moment as North turned towards her, looking past him at Miss Kenderdine, with a slight inclination of her head. The movement was a tacit apology, very gracious and easy ; but there was something in Lady Karslake's eyes, as they rested for one moment on the girl, which was not quite in harmony with it. Miss Kenderdine returned the look with a silent stare, and Lady Karslake, addressing the two generally, went on with a low laugh,—

"I am always inclined to fight for the absent—innate pugnacity on my part, I suppose. I read the article of which you are both so scornful this afternoon, and it struck me as being rather nice."

"The word describes it exactly, Lady Karlake," said North, with a touch of irony in his dry tone. "It is really very nice!"

"Then why sneer at it?"

Lady Karlake put the question quickly, looking him full in the face as she spoke. But it was Miss Kenderdine who answered.

"Scented soap is nice," she said. "But it would be wasteful and futile to scour Seven Dials with it, wouldn't it?"

"Not wasteful, if it sweetened Seven Dials," returned Lady Karlake promptly, and with a spirited ring in her voice. "As to the futility—"

"That is the point," interposed North, drily. "Is it possible to sweeten Seven Dials?"

"No!" said Miss Kenderdine, callously.

"Yes!" said Lady Karlake, impetuously.

Miss Kenderdine broke into a laugh, and looked at North Branston.

"The casting vote, Dr. Branston," she demanded. "Come, which is it?"

Lady Karlake did not speak. She had turned her eyes, in which a delicate and perfectly perceptible aversion had arisen, from Miss Kenderdine to North; and she was watching him with a half-curious smile. North did not look at her, however, he turned carelessly to Miss Kenderdine.

"No!" he said. "It isn't possible. Seven Dials is radically evil-savoured!"

"And human nature is radically wrong?"

He glanced at Lady Karlake as she spoke these words, and made a gesture of acquiescence.

"More or less," he said. "The thing that will right it has not been discovered yet, at any rate. It isn't possible to eradicate the tendencies and instincts of

centuries with a few facts about the sciences and a knowledge of grammar and arithmetic. It is an eloquent testimony to the blank hopelessness of the whole subject that such a remedy should ever have suggested itself!"

The manner of the speech was indescribably hard, and Lady Karslake's brows contracted quickly. She did not speak immediately, and Miss Kenderdine said flip-pantly,—

"There's nothing much the matter with human nature. It's admirably adapted to the world as it is. But a certain proportion of the population is sure to go to the bad, and certain classes of crime are hereditary in certain classes of society. Education isn't likely to prevent crime. It will only mix it up—just as cheap things have mixed up the fashions in dress."

She laughed as she spoke, looking to North with an assured demand on his appreciation, and Lady Karslake glanced at her with a cold haughtiness of expression which her sensitive face very seldom assumed.

"Crime is a large word," she said. "I'm afraid I don't feel capable of coping with so solid a subject. But," she turned to North with a wilful, fleeting smile, "there are other and less imposing lines, are there not, on which something may be said for education? How about the dull and narrow lives which a little knowledge widens? How about the ugly lives which it may beautify? How about the talents it develops which might never otherwise have made themselves apparent?"

She had spoken impetuously, as though impelled half by a spirit of opposition to the atmosphere which surrounded her, half by an enthusiasm which seemed partly æsthetic, partly sentimental, but which in its very unexpectedness was wholly womanly and characteristic. North paused a moment and smiled unpleasantly.

"As to the widening and beautifying, Lady Karslake,

I don't feel qualified to speak, for neither of those processes has ever come under my notice. I'm not prepared to deny that when the present system of education gets hold of the right kind of subject, it does develop that which might otherwise have lain dormant. But the question is—is that development a gain ? ”

“Surely ! ”

He lifted his eyebrows at the impetuous response, and went on slowly and coldly,—

“Oddly enough, a case of the kind has just come under my notice. A boy with instincts and capacities above his station in life ; with no physical stamina ; brought on by Board School teaching ; developed into a sensitive, ambitious kind of being ; and provided with an opening in an office in the City. He gets on, marries, overstrains his energies, and collapses hopelessly in health at five-and-twenty.”

He had told the story baldly, callously, and the heartless interjection with which Miss Kenderdine responded was absolutely in keeping with his tone. Lady Karslake had listened with her chin resting lightly on her hand as her elbow rested on the table, her face interested and intent.

“It's not an uncommon case,” said Miss Kenderdine flippantly. “It serves your point well enough, Dr. Branston, except for one detail. If he was a really clever fellow I suppose he would have educated himself, School Board or no School Board, and the result would have been the same.”

“Not quite,” said North. “He would have educated himself no doubt, but the strain and hardship involved would have killed him earlier, and there would have been no wife and child in the case.”

At that instant Mrs. Slade-Fenton bowed. With a quick, sudden gesture, Lady Karslake rose. Without

another word or glance at Miss Kenderdine or at North Branston, she swept out of the dining-room.

When Dr. Slade-Fenton and his male guests appeared in the drawing-room some twenty minutes later, she was sitting at the far end of the room, hardly in touch with the larger circle of ladies, which was being entertained by Miss Kenderdine. She did not look towards North Branston as he came in. Some time passed, during which she talked to various people with somewhat capricious interest, and then, as in the conventional fulfilment of his social duties, North strolled up to her.

There had been some music, and he produced a sarcastic comment on it for her benefit. She answered him briefly, without looking at him ; then she suddenly lifted her eyes to his face. No one was very near them ; some one began to play at the moment, and they were out of sight from the piano. Her words were audible to him alone, as she said in a quick, moved voice,—

"Dr. Branston, I hardly know you ! What have you done to yourself ?"

He looked down at her without the faintest touch or comprehension in his face, and then sat down mechanically on the corner seat beside her.

"I am not aware that I have done anything to myself," he said, with a slight smile.

She scanned his face for a moment in silence, a curious regret struggling with the indignation in her eyes.

"No," she said slowly. "I suppose you are not. I hear that you are very successful, by-the-bye, and I believe I ought to congratulate you. But don't you know that you have altered horribly ?"

"We all alter, don't we ?" he said nonchalantly ; "and I suppose most of us alter, as you say, horribly."

She put up her hand with a swift, imperious gesture.

"Don't!" she said impetuously. "I'm not going to argue the point with you; it's true enough, I daresay. But if it's true, it isn't the less dreadful. It isn't the less one of the saddest things in life. Ah!" she let her hand fall with an indescribably pathetic gesture. "What a miserable, miserable thing it is to grow old!"

The words were spoken with a laugh, but there was a helpless, restless unhappiness behind them which was not to be concealed. North Branston looked at the womanly face, and for the first time that evening his own expression altered slightly.

"You have not come to that stage yet," he said, and beneath the conventional disclaimer of the reply there lurked a ring of vague sympathy. "Time has been kind to you, I hope, Lady Karslake?"

She lifted her eyes to his face again with a little wayward grimace.

"Is time ever kind?" she said.

His eyes grew deep and sombre, and he stared down at the carpet at his feet.

"Have you found that out?" he said, in a low, abrupt tone. "That is a pity. You used not to know it! You used—"

"I used to take things as they came!" she said, interrupting him with an inflection in her voice half whimsical and half sad. "Well, I do it still. I've got through one phase of my life, I suppose; that's all. I've lost sundry illusions, and I did not even know I possessed any! And all my contemporaries have lost their illusions too! I know it's natural that you should have changed as you have done, for instance—it's the way of the world. But—I hate it."

"What are these changes that you see in me?"

The words came from North after a long pause; a pause filled in by the hopeless questions of Schumann's "Warum." His strong, doctor's hands were playing

absently with the feathers of her fan. She did not answer him at once.

"It is not a nice thing to say," she said at last, very quietly. "But you have grown a little brutal, Dr. Branston."

He laughed suddenly and harshly.

"Probably I was always a little brutal," he answered.

Her answer came quick and decided.

"No, you were only bitter."

"I suppose the transition is not an unnatural one."

"Ah!" she ejaculated, with a sharp movement of pain, "does that make it the less sad?"

The words were followed by a silence. With an abrupt movement North had leaned forward, letting the fan dangle between his knees and looking straight before him. Lady Karlake leaned back, her face full of faint, wistful sadness, listening, it seemed, dreamily to the music. At last she smiled, a wistful, self-derisive little smile, and turned her head suddenly towards him.

"Dr. Branston," she said, "I'm seized by a most conventional impulse. I want to try a most conventional experiment. Tell me some more about your poor clerk. Only"—her brows contracted peremptorily—"please remember that I am woman enough to be touched by the story, and not scientist enough to dissect it. Ah," she added quickly, as he looked up, "you are not so—brutal—as you choose to make yourself."

There was nothing brutal, there was nothing even hard about the face North turned to her so slowly. It was heavy, disturbed, and gloomy.

"There is not much more to tell," he said gently enough. "He is going into the consumptive hospital to-morrow—it's his only chance."

"And his wife?"

"She will go on in their lodgings in Camden Town,"

"Have they any money? What is she like?"

"She is a girl of nineteen. She was a dressmaker. She has—such money as she can earn!"

"I thought so!" exclaimed Lady Karlake, almost delightedly. "Give me her address, Dr. Branston; I shall go and see her."

He looked at her spirited eager face, almost girlish at the moment in its excitement, and a sad little smile touched the corners of his mouth.

"You won't find it answer, Lady Karlake," he said, in a low voice.

"Why, won't she care to see me?" she retorted, and the flickering fun about her mouth and eyes showed that the misunderstanding was wilful.

"She would be delighted, no doubt. It is the experiment I mean. You will only be disappointed."

"I can but try," she said, and through the laughing defiance of her voice there rang a singular earnestness. "Things need a little setting straight with me, and perhaps philanthropy may serve the purpose. Who knows? You don't, I'm sure, for you have never tried."

She rose as she spoke, he followed her example, and as they stood facing one another their eyes met, and the laugh died away from her face. She held out her hand to him with a swift gesture that was full of kindness.

"I hope I have not hurt you," she said.

"No," he answered. "You have not hurt me, Lady Karlake."

Half an hour later, the last of her guests having departed, Mrs. Slade-Fenton turned to Miss Kenderdine with a rather unconvincing air of nonchalance: "Dr. Branston went early," she said.

Miss Kenderdine's face was not pleasant to look upon as she answered shortly,—

"Yes, he went directly after that woman! I should

like to know, Alice, what in the world induced you to put her next him at dinner ! ”

“ It was an accident,” said Mrs. Slade-Fenton, with the irritability of fatigue. “ Of course it was an accident. Most unfortunate, certainly ! But I don’t suppose there’s any harm done ? ”

“ I’m not so sure of that,” retorted Miss Kenderdine sullenly.

CHAPTER XXIII.

NEARLY ten days had passed away, and it was an afternoon in the first week of June. The weather was lovely, summer sunshine and the softest of south winds producing an effect delightful even in London; and Lady Karslake's morning room in Wilton Street—shaded from any glare and full of soft, fresh air—seemed to have the full benefit of all that was pleasantest in the atmosphere. It was a charming room. In the two rather wandering years that she had spent since her husband's death, Lady Karslake had created several similarly dainty apartments, details of tastefully appointed houses. She had a peculiar faculty of impressing something of her own personality upon her surroundings; and, though she had taken the house in Wilton Street for a year only, saying that by the end of that time she would probably have tired of London, it had all the characteristics of a home.

On this particular afternoon she was straying about the room with absent, uncertain movements; quick fluctuations of expression were passing across her face, evidently the outcome of some kind of irresolution; and when she suddenly went across the room to the writing-table, there was a laugh in her eyes which invested the decision to which she had evidently come with the character of a humorous impulse. She wrote a brief note, and directed it to North Branston. Then she rang the bell.

"Send this by hand at once," she said to the servant who answered it. "If Dr. Branston is at home the messenger is to wait for an answer." She paused a moment and glanced out of the window, adding carelessly: "I want a hansom. Mind it's a nice one."

The direction in which Lady Karslake was driven was not one in which her social duties usually took her. Before very long the districts with which she was familiar were left behind, and the cab, going rapidly northward, passed into regions more or less sordid and even squalid, in which even the loveliness of the summer day seemed to lose its charm; and in which Lady Karslake's daintily dressed figure attracted sundry glances of surprise or dull admiration. At length, in a dreary little street on the very outskirts of Camden Town, the cab stopped and Lady Karslake got out. She glanced about her rather dubiously.

"You had better wait," she said to the cabman.

She lifted the little knocker and knocked with an imperious, if unaccustomed hand; a pause ensued, and she was going to knock again when the door was opened with a jar and a rattle, and a young woman stood on the threshold. She was a girl with the sallow complexion of the lower middle-class Londoner, and her white face looked tired and worried. She was very untidy. The brown dress which she wore had once been pretty and even fashionable, though poor enough in material; but it was spotted now and torn; and her fair hair, which was not unlike in hue to the gleaming coils under Lady Karslake's little black bonnet, stood in great need of brushing. She was the wife of the consumptive clerk, whose story North had told to Lady Karslake and Miss Kenderdine at Mrs. Slade-Fenton's dinner-party.

She started when her eyes fell upon her visitor and coloured crimson.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon," she said in a sharp, common voice. "I never thought of seeing you again so soon, Lady Karslake—I'm sure it's very good of you. Mrs. Green"—Mrs. Green was the landlady—"has just stepped out, and I said I'd go to the door if any one should come. I'm sure I never thought—won't you walk upstairs, Lady Karslake? I'm afraid it's rather in confusion. I hope you won't mind."

She led the way to the foot of the stairs as she spoke, awkwardly enough; and as she followed Lady Karslake up she gave sundry surreptitious pats and twists to her disordered hair, and tried hastily to conceal, with the assistance of a pin, the rent in her skirt. The colour had faded from her cheeks, but her eyes were bright with mortification and annoyance. About her speech, voluble as it had been, there had lurked a constraint, almost an antagonism, which might have been responsible for something a little aggressive about her manner.

"I thought I should like to come and see that you were not working too hard," said Lady Karslake, as she mounted the shabby narrow staircase. "It is good for you to have a little of your time wasted, you know!"

Lady Karslake spoke very pleasantly; graciously, kindly, and without the faintest suggestion of patronage.

But charming as her tone was, it apparently lacked that something necessary to bring into touch the refined, self-possessed woman and the common, discomposed girl. The annoyance did not die out of the face of the latter.

"I'm sure it's very good of you," she repeated, "and I'm much obliged for the work you've sent me."

She stretched out her arm in front of Lady Karslake and threw open a door, revealing a stuffy little room which looked as though its owner had lacked time or inclination to tidy it for several days. As the door

opened there was a cry of "Mammy !" and a tiny boy of about three years old came tottering delightedly across the room. He stopped short as he became aware of the strange presence which accompanied his mother, and then, advancing slowly and with shy sobriety, stood clinging for protection to the shabby, brown skirt, and gazing, wide-eyed, at Lady Karslake. He was a pretty little fellow, with large serious eyes and delicate features, but the little sailor suit was worn and untidy, and the sweet baby face was not particularly clean.

Lady Karslake looked down at him with dubious, half-laughing eyes and a sweet smile.

"Well, little Reginald," she said ; "will you say 'How do you do?' to-day?"

She bent down, looking very lovely with that half-careless, half-coaxing smile upon her face ; the untidy young mother awaiting results, as it were, her self-assertion subsiding for the first time before the half-anxious pride with which she watched the child. Apparently the delicate smiling face inspired little Reginald with confidence. A responsive smile dawned slowly on his features. He loosed his hold upon the brown dress, and stretched out his hand towards Lady Karslake. Unfortunately his general appearance had not prepared his wooer for the condition of his hand, and as an inconceivably grimy and sticky little palm approached her delicate grey glove she shrank back instinctively and involuntarily. Before she could control the impulse his mother had caught the child up in her arms, and was kissing him angrily, almost violently.

"You're a dirty boy, Regie," the girl said, and the sharp, angry feeling in her voice was not intended for the child to whom it was addressed. "You're not fit to touch Lady Karslake. You'd better run away and play."

She kept him hugged tightly in her arms, however, in

spite of the suggestion, and looked across him, first at her visitor, and then round the room.

"I'm all in confusion here, as I said," she said airily. "I'm not such a quick worker as I used to be, having been out of the way of it for so long, and now I've got to sit to it again I don't seem to get time for anything else."

There was about the manner of the speech an obvious desire to impress the fact that the years of her married life had been years of dignified leisure, which taken in conjunction with her harassed face and general dishevelment was sufficiently pitiful. Lady Karlake, however, put aside the question of the room with a careless ease which brought an added shade of annoyance to her hostess's face—"It was as if," the girl declared afterwards, "she thought it quite natural that one should live in such a pig-sty!"—and went on with a quick change of tone and manner,—

"When did you see your husband last?" she said. "And how is he getting on?"

The careworn lines on the girl's face deepened, and the sharp note of anxiety rang in her voice, evidently in spite of herself, as she answered,—

"I saw him yesterday," she said. "We went to a great big place, didn't we, Regie, you and me, to see father?"

She cuddled the child closer to her as she spoke, as with an unconscious craving for sympathy, which stood out in marked contrast to her attitude towards Lady Karlake.

"He doesn't seem to be much better," she went on abruptly, fixing a pair of haggard eyes on Lady Karlake's face. "The nurse wouldn't say much; it doesn't seem to be their way. And I didn't see Dr. Branston."

Her voice altered as she spoke North's name into a

singular mixture of awe and admiration, and Lady Karlake looked at her with careless curiosity.

"Does Dr. Branston attend your husband, then?" she said.

The girl shook her head.

"There are lots of doctors, it seems," she said. "Dr. Branston goes sometimes. But Reginald thinks more of him than of the others. I've never seen him. But Reginald says he's the kindest of them all, as well as the cleverest, though he does things in a very hard way."

She stopped suddenly in her rather gossiping communication, as though remembering the fact that her present visitor had introduced herself on her previous visit as an acquaintance of Dr. Branston's. The remembrance seemed to suggest another train of thought to her.

"I—I suppose you don't happen to know what Dr. Branston thinks about Reginald?" she said, hesitatingly.

Lady Karlake made a gesture of negation, her expression very gentle and sympathetic.

"No," she said, "I really don't. But I shall see him to-night, very likely, and I'll ask him, shall I?"

"Will you?" said the girl eagerly; "and let me know?"

"And let you know, of course!" returned Lady Karlake, easily, rising as she spoke. "I shall come and see you again soon. And now I must not keep my hansom waiting any longer. Good-bye."

She held out her hand, and, as the girl took it awkwardly, she went on pleasantly and lightly,—

"If I can be of any practical use to you, you will tell me, won't you?"

The girl coloured crimson and dropped her eyes.

"Thank you, Lady Karlake," she said, with a strange mixture of gratitude and reluctance in her tone. "You've

paid for that work in advance, you know, and we shall do nicely till Reginald is about again."

"Good-bye, little Reginald," said Lady Karlake, with a light touch on the child's fair hair; and a few minutes later she was being driven in the direction of the London that she knew.

It would have been rather difficult to tell from Lady Karlake's expression whether or no her expedition had been satisfactory to her. Those faint lines of satiety or dissatisfaction were certainly less apparent than usual in her face, but they seemed to be effaced only by a play of humour. She seemed to be thinking rather of herself than of the girl she had just left.

A flush of genuine satisfaction lighted up her face as her cab stopped at her own door just as the bell was rung by North Branston.

"How nice of you!" she exclaimed lightly, as she got out. "How angry you would have been if you had been told that I was not at home!"

"I should have been surprised, certainly," said North. "Your note was rather urgent, Lady Karlake."

He was looking tired and slightly worried, but he spoke with a smile. He and Lady Karlake had met more than once since Mrs. Slade-Fenton's dinner party, and a friendly confidence seemed to have established itself between them; without being exactly a renewal of the old terms on which they had stood—a renewal never to be achieved where life has intervened—it represented a very pleasant readjustment of those terms.

"Was it urgent?" said Lady Karlake, with a laugh. "Well, yes, perhaps it was! I wanted to see you at once. I hope it isn't inconvenient to you to come to me."

She added the last sentence as she preceded him down the hall, turning to him over her shoulder.

"I've been to the other end of nowhere," she continued lightly. "That's why I am rather late. I've been to see that little Mrs. Austin—your patient's wife, you know."

The glance she flashed at him as she finished had an odd touch of defiance in it. She had seated herself near the drawing-room window, and was drawing off her gloves with deft, graceful movements.

"I hope it has been a success?" said North, not ironically, but almost gently.

"A great success!" she declared gaily. "It was my second visit; I went last Saturday first, and I've been immensely interested. What a curious type it is—the London working girl! One of the products of the nineteenth century, I suppose! It was nice of your patient to marry in his own class! I imagine he is a good deal more refined than she is?"

"By-the-bye," she went on, something of gravity, very charming, but an affair of the surface only, touching her manner, "What do you think of him? Has he any chance?"

North shook his head.

"No," he said tersely. "It's too late!"

Lady Karlake made a quick gesture of sympathy.

"Ah!" she said. "Isn't that terrible?"

The words were succeeded by a moment's silence.

North Branston was gazing out of window, a rather absent look upon his dark face. Lady Karlake was meditatively stroking the gloves on her knee, quick lights and shadows of expression chasing one another across her features. At last she lifted her head and looked at North, with a half-laugh in her eyes, though her voice was a little imperious.

"I haven't told you yet what I wanted to see you about!" she said. "I want you to help me, Dr. Bran-

ston. I want to do some more of this kind of thing. There's a whole phase of life that I don't know anything about, and I should like to go into it ! ”

North Branston turned his head and faced her.

“ There are many phases of life which you don't know anything about, Lady Karlake,” he said.

She shrugged her shoulders.

“ No doubt,” she said. “ Perhaps I shall take them all in turn ; who knows ? The idea suggests a delightfully wide field of occupation. I think I'll take one at a time, though, and I'll begin with the one to which you can help me.”

Behind the wilful determination that rang in her voice there was a faint suggestion of restlessness ; and she did not pause long enough to allow him to speak, but went on lightly,—

“ It's a horribly conventional thing to do ! I know exactly the kind of things I should say of any other woman in my place who took to philanthropy ! I've said them all of myself—it's quite as amusing ! I want to go to your hospital, Dr. Branston, and see the people—I might take them some flowers and things, mightn't I ?—and hear about their families, and so on. There must be a great many things I could do when I came to know about them ! ”

“ You could give a great deal of money away,” answered North. His tone was very grim, but there was an odd pity in his eyes as they rested on her. “ Is that what you want, Lady Karlake ? ”

She made an impulsive gesture of indifference.

“ I don't know,” she said. “ It doesn't matter much about the money. I should spend it somehow. Can you manage it for me, Dr. Branston ? That is the point.”

“ It is easily managed,” he answered. “ In fact, no management is needed. You can come on any visitors’

day, and you can talk to any of the patients." He stopped a moment ; and then he said, in a low voice, and as though he spoke almost involuntarily : " Lady Karslake, won't you believe me when I tell you again what I hinted to you the other night ? It won't do ! "

She looked into his cynical, tired face, and in her eyes there rose a vague dread as of some indefinite shadow not to be ignored. She tried to laugh.

" Oh, don't ! " she said suddenly, in a quick, pleading tone. " It is—it is only a freak. "

She rose impulsively and crossed the room mechanically to where the tea-table, forgotten by her until now, was waiting. North followed her in silence. She poured out two cups of tea in a heedless, uncertain fashion which was very unlike her.

" Sugar ? " she said. Then she began to recover herself, as it seemed. She sat down by the table and began to talk in her ordinary tone and manner, changing the subject, however, completely.

" By-the-bye, " she said, " I heard something about you the other day that interested me very much. Is it true that Dr. Slade-Fenton wants you for a partner ? "

Phases of intimacy are curious things, subtle and not easy of definition. In that one moment of strange, strong feeling Lady Karslake and North Branston seemed to have passed out of one phase and into another. A change had come to her tone to him ; an unconscious sympathetic assurance. And there was a change, too, something the same in character, in the manner of his reply. He sighed, rather wearily.

" Something of the kind is true, " he said. " The partnership is open to me if I like to take it. "

" It has drawbacks, I suppose ? "

The quick intuitive sympathy with which the words were uttered seemed to draw him on further.

"Many men would say that it had no drawbacks," he said. "It is a first-class position, of course—of its kind. I've had a most diplomatic interview with Slade-Fenton to-day, in which all its advantages have been delicately placed before me."

"Does he want his answer?"

North nodded.

"I can't keep it about much longer," he said heavily.

Lady Karslake sipped her tea meditatively.

"I don't much like the Slade-Fentons," she said at last, with an accent of distaste which was more pronounced than the words themselves. "There's something about them—oh, I don't know what it is, but they advertise themselves so! No, I don't like them!"

"As to that," returned North callously, "one must take people as they come. The Slade-Fentons are very average specimens, I fancy. As far as advertisement goes, everybody does it—must do it, in fact."

"True," she assented. She paused a moment, and then said, "If you don't dislike the personal connection, do you mind telling me what you see against the thing?"

"I don't like the personal connection," said North, with a slight emphasis on the verb. He had spoken slowly, and he went on more slowly still, "It's difficult to believe, but I suppose there is some aftermath of a young man's ambition at the back of my hesitation. A fashionable practice is not precisely what I coveted once."

He broke off abruptly with a bitter laugh.

"After all," he said harshly, "it's a very good thing in its way! Who gets what he coveted in this world—or who cares about it when he gets it?"

"Can you not get what you coveted?" she asked gently.

He turned his eyes upon her almost angrily.

"I've left off coveting!" he said. "That's the point!"

She drew a quick little sigh.

"It seems to me," she said, and her voice, clear and musical, broke a long silence, "that you would be wise to take the partnership. Nobody goes as far as they mean to when they are young, evidently. The only thing to be done is to take things as they are, and adapt oneself to them. After all, though I don't care about Dr. Slade-Fenton myself, his position isn't one to be despised."

"No," said North gloomily. "That's true, of course."

"And surely," she went on, "it is better to settle down, to accept the inevitable flattening that life brings, than to keep on struggling against it and denying it. What's the use of denying it? What's the use of struggling? The only thing to be done is to persuade oneself—to cheat oneself, if you like—into forgetting it."

He looked at her.

"Is that what you're doing?" he asked.

"I?" she said. She spoke hurriedly, and with a nervous laugh. "Oh, I'm not a serious person, you know. People such as I, don't feel these things. But I have a kind of inkling into your state of mind, and that is what I advise. Take the partnership. By-the-bye——" she stopped, with a sudden change of manner, and began to play absently with her teaspoon; then she said in a lower voice, and without looking up at him, "Dr. Branston, I'm going to ask you a question. Are you going to marry Miss Kenderdine?"

"No," said North.

"You know that—it is said?"

"I can't help that," he replied.

Lady Karslake raised her head quickly.

"I don't like to hear a man speak like that," she said. "I am glad, though, that the report is not true. I do not like Miss Kenderdine. I suppose, then, there is no such idea in connection with this partnership?"

"Certainly not," returned North. "Slade-Fenton doesn't wish it, I fancy."

He had risen as he spoke, and he stood before her, looking down at her as though he were unaccountably loth to take leave.

"I must go," he said rather abruptly. "Lady Karslake, I hope I haven't bored you?"

"I think you know that you have not," she said. "I shall want very much to hear how you decide. You will let me know?"

"I will," he said simply; and a hand-clasp curiously eloquent of the work of that hour's conversation passed between them. He was just turning away when one of her quick changes of thought made itself apparent in her face, and she stopped him with an exclamation.

"The hospital," she said. "I want to settle about it. When will you take me there, Dr. Branston? I should like you to introduce me, please."

"I could go with you on Thursday," he said, "if that would suit you. Thursday, at two o'clock?"

"Thursday, at two oclock, by all means," she answered. "Come to lunch first."

The appointment then made was kept in due course. Lady Karslake's first visit to the hospital seemed to give her perfect satisfaction. She moved to and fro about the wards, graceful and sympathetic, followed in all her movements by many pairs of admiring, wondering, or grateful eyes. She talked to the patients with her inalienable charm of manner, but with a touch of curiosity and eagerness underlying all her gracious ways.

To the consumptive clerk she was particularly kind, as with a sense that in his story she had found her first introduction to the new phase of life which was unfolding itself before her.

And after that first visit she went to the hospital again and again, throwing herself into the interests provided by it with a spirit and ardour that were eminently characteristic. It was her whim, apparently, to learn something of the life involved in many of the saddest cases ; and finding the hospital itself, as it seemed, an insufficient field for her energies, she insisted on visiting the houses in which these lives were lived. That her impetuosity and her absolute ignorance should be imposed upon again and again was a foregone conclusion ; that in such cases North Branston should be her unfailing resource, whether she summoned him to her aid, or whether he interposed against her wilful wishes, was no less inevitable.

The month of June, during which Lady Karlake pursued her new interest with unabated vehemence, thus made North a familiar visitor at the house in Wilton Street. He was its mistress's only adviser in her new pursuit, and, as such, he was in constant request. It fell to his lot to thwart her not infrequently, and he did his work with a strength such as Lady Karlake had never encountered before. But there were other times when he would guide, rather than frustrate, her plans with a grave sympathy before which her half-laughing impetuosity would become strangely hushed.

Nor was it Lady Karlake's philanthropic schemes alone that brought the two together. Lady Karlake never again alluded to the change in North Branston of which she had spoken at the Slade-Fentons' ; it seemed to have slipped for her into the region of accepted facts. And yet, accept it as she might and did, there was that

in their mutual relations which was only to be explained by that original consciousness on her part ; an equalization of the terms on which they stood, which had its origin in the vague pity and regret for him which hung about her. Early in June, North accepted Dr. Slade-Fenton's offer of a share in his practice, and the decision seemed to bring an added touch of cynicism to his personality. The weeks that ensued, with the business formalities necessary to the completion of the partnership which they brought in their train, seemed to bring each its own quota of bitterness to him. But the ice broken by his first discussion of the subject with Lady Karslake, never formed again. There was a tacit suggestion of a sense of fellowship about their subsequent discussions of details as they arose, and such discussions never failed to bring something of softening to the harsh gloom of North Branston's face.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

THE weather had grown very hot. The soft breezes and refreshing rains, which had kept June cool and pleasant, had given place, with the advent of July, to a dead calm and a cloudless sky, under which London suffocated and baked.

Lady Karslake had come down to her solitary luncheon with a rather indolent and dissatisfied expression of countenance. She did not like the hot weather. Her own house was as cool a spot as was to be met with, but even there the atmosphere was somewhat oppressive ; and the sultry glare of the streets was unendurable to her. She had carried on her philanthropic pursuits, under these circumstances, with capricious interest for about a week ; but to-day she had rung the bell about half an hour before lunch-time, and had countermanded the carriage for that afternoon.

She seemed to have no very definite notion, however, as to the employment of the time thus thrown on her hands. She dawdled idly over her lunch ; and she was still sitting at the table, playing absently with her napkin ring, though her meal itself was long since over, when a note was brought in to her.

It was from North Branston, and she opened it lazily. It contained, as she had expected, the address of the family of one of her hospital protégés whom she had intended to visit that afternoon. But it contained something

else for which she had not looked. The young clerk, Reginald Austin, had fluctuated in health during the past month as only consumptive patients, perhaps, can fluctuate; growing a little weaker with each return of the sadder symptoms, but having intervals of such comparative ease that his professional attendants alone realized how near was drawing the inevitable end. He and his young wife had retained their peculiar position as the first-comers in Lady Karslake's interest, and she had cultivated them assiduously, doing all, and more than all, that their pride would allow, in the way of practical help; and seeing them both constantly. A brief but not ungentle sentence at the end of North's note told her now that the end had come suddenly, and the young husband was dead.

Lady Karslake sat very still for a moment, gazing down at the letter in her hand. Her eyes were a little wide and startled; but side by side with the touch of awe thus produced, and with the pity that sprang up with it, there was a vague, all-pervading suggestion of an interest that was almost curiosity. She rose abruptly at last and walked aimlessly to the window. She stood there for some moments gazing out unseeingly into the glare. Then she turned mechanically away, and going upstairs to the drawing-room, sat down in her favourite chair and took up a book.

Apparently, however, her attention was not to be fixed. Nearly half an hour passed, and then, as in a sudden flash, the uncertain desire in her face merged itself into decision. She rose impulsively; sent downstairs a peremptory order for the speedy appearance of her carriage; and in less than a quarter of an hour was being driven rapidly northwards.

It was three o'clock when she set out. More than three hours had passed when she returned. She entered

the house with swift, nervous movements that seemed to imply an unwonted state of tension of some sort. The servant who opened the door noticed that her mistress was very pale.

"Dr. Branston is in the drawing-room, my lady," said the woman. "He said he would wait a little when he heard you were out."

Lady Karlake had stopped abruptly as the woman began to speak. She stood still for a moment, and then she went on slowly into the drawing-room.

North Branston was established at that end of the long room furthest from the door, and he rose, as she entered, and came towards her.

"I waited," he said, "because I wanted to see you particularly, Lady Karlake. I have heard of some people—" He had drawn near enough to her to see her face, and he broke off abruptly. "I have heard of some people," he began once more, "to whom you might—" He stopped again, looking at her intently. "Where have you been?" he said gently.

Lady Karlake had made no attempt to greet him. She had come to a standstill as he met her, and was returning his gaze. There was a wretched little parody of a laugh in her eyes, but her delicate lips were twitching slightly.

"I'm glad you're here," she said; her voice was a trifle strained and reckless. "It annoyed me at first, but after all it's only fair that you should know. You are a true prophet—of evil. The experiment, as you call it, has failed. It's over."

She turned away from him with the unreasoningly angry abruptness of acutely painful feeling, and walked inconsequently to the tea-table.

"Why haven't you had some tea?" she demanded. "Don't you want any?"

North did not follow her except with his sombre eyes. His face was unusually troubled.

"Where have you been?" he said again.

He spoke with direct and masterful insistence, and Lady Karslake yielded to him—if yielding it were—with a sudden impetuosity which gave her words the character of spontaneous statement.

"I've been to Camden Town," he said. "I've been to see Mrs. Austin. And she didn't know. I had to tell her."

A harsh exclamation broke from North and his eyes flashed wrathfully.

"She didn't know?" he said. "Why, she should have heard this—"

Lady Karslake interrupted him with a fierce little gesture. Her face was working pitifully.

"What does it matter how it happened?" she said. "It was carelessness of some kind, I suppose. He was only one of a number at the hospital, it was of no great importance to any one there whether he lived or died. It is only to that poor wretched girl—"

A kind of spasm of realization passed across her face, and her eyes gazed out, from under their contracted brows, with a horror in them which seemed to reflect a momentary, inward vision of the awful contrast existing between the outward appearance, and inward significance, of the same event. The look passed, merged in passionate personal feeling, and she turned vehemently upon North Branston.

"Why have you never told me what a wretch I was being?" she demanded. "You must have known! You ought to have known. And you ought to have told me. What business has any one to play with stories like the Austins'—to make an occupation out of their misery—to find an interest in it? They are real, these

sordid little tragedies. There's lifeblood in them. And only what is real and earnest has any right to touch them."

North Branston had not seated himself. He was standing with one arm resting on the ledge of a tall cabinet, his face full of a gloomy feeling, in which all the narrower and harder lines of his face seemed to be submerged.

"Yes," he said, and his tone gave to the word the character of an admission wrung from him before now and against his will. "They are real."

"And how have I treated them?" she flashed out. "As playthings! You were quite right, of course. Life has grown flat to me, and I wanted something to give it a flavour. I was sorry for the people, of course, but I was much more curious about them. That is how I went to Mrs. Austin this afternoon. I was a little shocked and sorry, and I wanted to feel more—you know the kind of thing. And I was interested to see how she would take it."

"It went hard with her?"

"It was real to her," she cried. "Real! Real! Real! Oh, it's a ghastly thing to see heart-break like that, and know that you stand utterly outside it!"

She rose, spurred into physical movement by her intense mental consciousness, and went away to the window, standing there with one hand holding tightly to the curtains, her slight frame quivering a little.

The movement was followed by a long stillness. North Branston had hardly shifted his position, and it was Lady Karlake who spoke at last. She did not turn round. She had loosened her grasp on the curtain, and there was something relaxed and weary about her whole figure.

"So that's over!" she said; and her voice sounded

thin and dreary. "It's rather wretched of me to turn upon you. You didn't know what I was doing. We're much in the same condition, you and I, I suppose—full of failure!" She paused and sighed drearily. "I wonder why I feel so much worse than I did before?" she went on. "I wonder whether it's myself I'm sick of, or the world?"

She turned slowly as she finished, and looked at him, and North moved and came across the room to her. There was a gloomy strength in his face.

"Both, Lady Karslake, I'm afraid," he said.

She looked at him for a moment with a wistful struggle in her eyes.

"You are not encouraging," she said with a faint, uncertain smile.

"There are discouraging truths which are better faced," he said. "You say you and I are alike in a sense of failure. Perhaps to some extent we are; but I've gone further than you have, and I tell you this: half the active misery of your attitude lies in the denial of it. Resignation, Lady Karslake, is a word that has a wretched varnish of sickly sentiment upon it; but it is one of the finest words in the language, nevertheless."

"Resignation?" she repeated. "What do you mean by resignation?"

He paused a moment, looking at her almost sternly.

"I mean a composed acceptance of the inevitable," he said. "An acceptance that does not cry out because it finds the journey long and unprofitable; that realizes that there will come an end."

"What end?"

"Ah," he answered in a voice as low as hers, "who knows?"

She turned away, and stood with her head bent. He

watched her silently. It was in an odd, tentative voice that she said at last,—

"I suppose—there are people who get into touch with trouble—with people in trouble, I mean. I suppose—there is a way."

"There are people who make a way," he answered. His voice had hardened slightly. "But as a rule the manufacture is only another form of your experiment."

She made a gesture as of indescribable repugnance.

"I shall not try again," she said. "You need not be afraid ; it is not in my line."

There was another moment's pause, broken this time by North Branston. He held out his hand.

"You would like me to go now," he said gently.

North Branston had a dinner engagement for that evening. On the preceding day the deed of partnership between himself and Dr. Slade-Fenton had been finally signed and sealed, and he was to dine this evening alone with the Slade-Fentons in honour of the occasion. There was an absent, troubled expression on his face as he entered the drawing-room in fulfilment of this engagement, which was not only very unlike the demeanour to be expected of a man whose prospects have recently materially advanced, but which was also somewhat at variance with his usual cynical passivity of countenance.

Miss Kenderdine was not in the drawing-room when North arrived. She put in an appearance only just before dinner, and there was a touch of excitement about her when she did appear, and her lips were set into a determined line. They curved into a brilliant smile to meet North Branston, but even that hardly seemed to relax the tension of her expression.

Those smiles of Miss Kenderdine's had fallen on North Branston during the last month with uninterrupted

persistency. He had met her constantly ; and on all occasions Miss Kenderdine's cleverest and most friendly conversation, Miss Kenderdine's brightest and most attractive looks, had been exclusively at North Branston's service. That, as the month wore on, the clever conversation should have become a trifle strained and forced in its vivacity, and the looks a trifle fixed and stereotyped, was hardly surprising. The persistent cultivation of an object who remains absolutely impassive and apparently unconscious, under cultivation, is a pursuit hardly consistent with genuine amiability, and wholly inconsistent with genuine gaiety.

To-night, however, Miss Kenderdine had apparently rallied all her forces. The dinner-table conversation, gay and redolent of satisfaction and triumph, as the occasion demanded, was led by her ; the toast of success to the partnership, laughingly proposed by Dr. Slade-Fenton, was seconded by her ; and it was she who turned back at the dining-room door with an imperative command that she and Mrs. Slade-Fenton should not be left long alone.

"You two will see plenty of one another in the future !" she said. "You'd better not bore one another too soon !"

It was North alone, however, who reappeared in the drawing-room about a quarter of an hour later. Dr. Slade-Fenton had been called out. Mrs. Slade-Fenton was seated at her little writing-table as her guest entered, and she turned to him over her shoulder.

"You see, I'm not making a stranger of you !" she said in that tone of airy patronage which represented her most genial manner. "I'm going to finish my notes, and you must amuse yourself with Olive."

Miss Kenderdine was seated at the piano at the extreme end of the room ; and, as North made a vaguely

courteous reply and turned mechanically in her direction, she called out,—

“Come and sit over here, Dr. Branston, and I’ll play to you.”

She did not play, however. She motioned him to a chair facing her as she sat, and then letting her hands fall lightly in her lap, she turned her assured gaze full upon him.

“So it is settled,” she said. “Do you know, I’m really awfully glad about it.”

North had seated himself, grave and impassive, as if by instinct, in her presence.

“It is very kind of you,” he said.

“Of course,” she continued, “I’ve looked at it from a double point of view—as an outsider, and yet as knowing something of the working of the affair—and I can’t help knowing what a capital position it is. And do you know, at one time, I was really half afraid you were going to throw it away.”

Her voice had dropped a little as though to give a confidential nature to their talk by making it obviously impossible for Mrs. Slade-Fenton to hear it.

“Were you?” said North Branston.

Miss Kenderdine bit her lip, and the colour in her cheeks grew a little brighter. Then she looked at him attentively.

“What is the matter with you?” she said, with a touch of sprightly raillery in her low tone. “You don’t seem either so satisfied or so self-satisfied as you ought to be. Are you thinking of the future, of the new possibilities, the new obligations it will bring? You can’t have anything more to wish for professionally, that’s quite certain.” She struck a light chord on the piano. “Is there—anything else you want?” she said.

North Branston did not move. He was looking

absently before him. She glanced at him again and struck another chord.

"Is there anything you want?" she said in a slightly breathless voice, "that you hesitate to ask for?"

Her eyes were full upon him, bright with a reckless intensity of suspense in which seemed to be concentrated all the excitement with which her manner had been pervaded throughout the evening. As if influenced rather by their gaze than by her words, which, indeed, he seemed hardly to have heard, North Branstons turned his own eyes and met them. A dull red colour crept up to his forehead, and he moved abruptly.

"There are a good many things I want," he said; he spoke deliberately, and in his coldest manner. "But the one thing I want at this moment, Miss Kenderdine, I don't hesitate to ask for. That Brahms Impromptu, please."

With a movement so abrupt as to be absolutely violent, and with a sudden flare of passionately vindictive feeling in her eyes, Miss Kenderdine turned to the piano and began to play. She played well, as far as technique was concerned, with admirable precision and style, if without feeling. She dashed off the impromptu for which he had asked with a brilliancy hardly to be surpassed, and then she rose suddenly from the piano. Her face was rather white now, and the lips were set. She strolled carelessly towards that end of the room where Mrs. Slade-Fenton was sitting.

"Come, Alice," she said. "You've written notes enough. To whom are they?"

She took up the envelopes and read the names, commenting with merciless sarcasm on each of the owners. The last to which she came was addressed to Lady Karlake.

"Lady Karlake!" she said, tossing down the envelope

and laughing scornfully. "What's the use of inviting her? She has retired from the world, hasn't she, Dr. Branston?"

She turned upon North, who had perforce followed her, with a movement which was full of a hardly covered spite.

"In what sense, Miss Kenderdine?"

The words came from North very slowly, and with a singular reluctance. He had stopped, involuntarily as it seemed, and was standing facing the girl.

"She has taken to philanthropy, hasn't she?" said Miss Kenderdine with an unpleasant laugh. "She can't pay calls, I hear, because she is always visiting hospitals, and poking into people's homes! We all pose, of course, in this world, but I must say I think that kind of pose is the biggest humbug going.

"We all pose—yes!" repeated North mechanically.

"Such a commonplace pose, too," continued Miss Kenderdine, "especially for a widow! I suppose she found that people didn't make so much fuss with her as she expected."

"I must say I do not like to see a woman so set upon attention," observed Mrs. Slade-Fenton virtuously.

North Branston did not speak. There was a half-bewildered expression on his face, as of a man who is conscious that he is walking in his sleep and dreaming an incredible dream.

"You're her right hand, though, of course, Dr. Branston! I had forgotten that," went on Miss Kenderdine. It seemed as though, having once given play to her tongue, she was unable to stop herself. "You must know what it's all worth a great deal better than I do! How soon will she get tired of it, I wonder?"

As though her perceptions, less self-centred than those of the angry girl, had rendered her vaguely conscious of

something odd about North's expression, Mrs. Slade-Fenton interposed.

"Olive!" she said, in stately reproof, "you are letting your spirits run away with you. Lady Karslake is a mutual friend of ours!"

Then with a strong effort North Branston seemed to recover himself; he was very white, and there was a slightly dazed look about him. He made no attempt whatever to answer either speaker. He turned to his hostess and held out his hand.

"Will you excuse me if I say I have some pressing work to do?" he said briefly. "It is getting late."

Five minutes later he was out of the house, walking down the street with a heavy, regular step; his head bent; his figure braced and set as though he were forcing his way through some kind of dense, tangled obstacle.

CHAPTER XXV.

“Is Lady Karslake at home?”

North Branston's voice rang singularly stern as he asked the question. It was about half-past five—the hour at which he had been used to pay the almost daily visit which Lady Karslake's philanthropic interests had rendered necessary ; but his present call was rather a renewal than a continuance of that custom. Nearly a fortnight had passed, during which North had not once presented himself at the house in Wilton Street. Since his last visit to her, on the day on which he had dined with the Slade-Fentons, he and Lady Karslake had not met.

The servant, looking at him with the curiosity engendered by his absence, thought that Dr. Branston looked “cross enough to frighten you,” as she subsequently declared to a fellow servant. This private opinion, however, in nowise affected her official demeanour ; and, as she answered him respectfully in the affirmative, Dr. Branston strode past her into the house, going towards the drawing-room with so absorbed and rapid a step that for a moment the woman thought he did not intend to pause for a formal announcement of his presence. Then he stopped abruptly, and waited while the door was opened and his name spoken.

Lady Karslake was alone. It may have been the fact that her book was lying unheeded in her lap, and that

she was gazing rather absently before her, that gave her solitary figure a lonely look. As North was announced, she turned her head towards the door, a quick flash of expression, compounded of reproach and pleasure, passing across her features.

"Ah!" she said. "I thought you had deserted me, Dr. Branston."

She held out her hand to him without rising; and, the flash of expression subsiding with singular suddenness, certain subtle changes that the past fortnight had wrought in her face became instantly apparent. She was rather paler, there was a droop about her mouth, half contemptuous and half dreary, and her whole expression was tired and inert.

North Branston, however, hardly looked at her. He barely touched her hand, and then sat down in absolute silence.

Apparently Lady Karslake's nerves were in an unusually sensitive condition, for her visitor's demeanour seemed to irritate her. There was a decided touch of temper in her voice and manner as she said;

"Haven't you any excuses to offer, or don't you consider it worth while to offer them? I suppose you have been rather glad to redeem the time you've felt it your duty to waste on my freaks. Now, isn't that the truth?"

"No, not quite."

The words came from North, after a perfectly perceptible pause, in a low tone which was quite consonant with his appearance; but Lady Karslake did not notice the tone. She seemed to have drifted into a carping mood.

"Not quite; but very nearly," she retorted. "You are nothing if not uncompromising! Well, I must say that I think you might have let me down gently. I won't

say that you might have considered my boredom—I being suddenly bereft of an occupation”—this with a bitter little touch of self-contempt—“and that you might have looked in upon me once or twice from that point of view. We’ll say”—she laughed a little—“that you might have considered my self-esteem; you might have written me a civil little letter to say that all your patients were dying, and you were sorry that you couldn’t come and see me until they were dead. I shouldn’t have believed you; but it would have pleased me!”

Some vague sense of the drift of her speech seemed to penetrate North’s strange concentration, and he replied with grave straightforwardness,—

“If you have expected me, I am sorry. I never thought of it.” Then absolutely unconscious of her quick, half-indignant gesture, he went on: “I have not come, Lady Karslake, because I have made a discovery.”

His tone was very low; and, though it was steady enough, it was a little hoarse. His hand as it rested on the arm of his chair was tightly clenched; his eyes, very dark and with no light in their depths, were looking, as if under the influence of determined control, not at her, but past her.

His voice or his manner or some more subtle influence seemed suddenly to touch Lady Karslake. With one of those quick transitions of mood which made even her most captious and unreasonable temper charming in the eyes of the people who knew her best, she leaned forward suddenly.

“A discovery?” she said impulsively and gently. “A pleasant discovery, I hope! No?”

“That depends,” said North, “upon you!”

He had turned his eyes involuntarily as he spoke the four words, and they were resting now full on her face. As she met them, something seemed to arrest the

expression on Lady Karlake's face ; a quick, sudden flush swept into her cheeks, and then her own eyes altered, dilated into an expression of startled, incredulous amazement, and dropped as if in spite of herself. There was a moment's silence, and then she said quickly, and with a rather breathless laugh,—

"That's an enigma ! I can't answer it !"

North leaned a little forward.

"I've come to-day," he said, and there was an indescribable vibration in his voice, "to ask you to answer it. I've come to ask you to be my wife !"

"Dr. Branston !"

With all the eloquence of her astonished face, translated into sound in the utterance of the two short words, Lady Karlake had started to her feet. She stood for an instant looking at him, her slender, graceful figure quivering under the intense shock of her surprise ; and then as he too rose, she turned away, repeating her exclamation in a lower tone, and with a little catch in her breath,—

"Dr. Branston !"

"I've been abrupt," he said. "I should have waited, I suppose, and paved the way somehow. But I could not see you again, knowing what I know of myself now, without saying what I have said. I have never thought of such a possibility as—as this—in connection with myself ; and I deal hardly and roughly with it, as I do with most things."

She did not speak. She only stretched out one hand, and rested it upon the tall back of her chair. Her hand was trembling. With a gesture half bitter, half reckless, wholly consistent with the suppressed intensity of his whole demeanour, he went on again.

"And after all, how would delay serve me ? You know me. You know the worst of me, I think. I can

say nothing of myself to recommend me to you—there is nothing to be said. I am not a young man, and I shall hardly change much now. If you can give me what I ask, it must be out of your own generosity, through no desert of mine ! ”

With a swift, sudden gesture as though in repudiation of his words, Lady Karslake raised her hand. He stopped involuntarily, and in another moment she spoke, slowly, almost inaudibly,—

“ I am so amazed ! ” she said. “ So utterly amazed ! ”

“ I know,” he answered slowly. “ It’s natural. I am not the sort of man women—like. If you must say no, so be it ! I won’t annoy you. I understand that impotency would hardly help me. There’s only this I want to say before you answer me.” He paused a moment as if to choose his words. “ If you had been quite satisfied with life,” he said, “ I should not have spoken. I should have got over my discovery, as many men have done before me—as I shall probably have to do, as it is—and it would have worked in with the rest. But you are not satisfied. Life has shown its seamy side to both of us more or less. Perhaps we are neither of us what we might have been without that knowledge. But perhaps it might grind less heavily upon you for being shared. Perhaps companionship——”

She interrupted him. Walking with a swift, wild step across the room, she leaned her arm upon the mantelpiece and let her face fall forward on it.

“ Oh, wait a moment,” she cried in a choked, breathless voice. “ Wait ! Wait ! Let me think. I can’t realize ! I can’t understand ! ”

Across the set darkness of North’s face there flashed a light so sudden and so strangely eloquent that for the moment he was hardly recognizable. For a moment he stood motionless, obeying her, it seemed, by sheer force

of the most rigid self-control. Then he crossed the room and stood beside her. The light had left its traces on his features. Their calm was broken up.

"What is it you cannot understand?" he said. "Is it me?"

With a sudden impulsive lift of the head she turned and faced him. Her very lips were white, her eyes were dark and dilated with the intense question that they held.

"No!" she cried. "It's myself! Oh, are we sure? Are we both quite sure?"

"I am quite sure!"

His eyes, dark, steady, glowing, were looking full into hers. He drew no nearer to her, but he stretched out both his hands, half in appeal, half in insistence. Slowly, very slowly, with the colour creeping over her face as if she had been a girl, she placed her hands in his; his fingers closed over them, and he felt her shiver from head to foot. For a moment they stood motionless. Then gently, and meeting with no resistance, he drew her nearer.

"You are quite sure!" he said.

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CHAPTER XXVI.

THERE had been a great dining of a section of the medical profession at one of the big restaurants. Dr. Slade-Fenton and North Branston had come away together, and had passed out of the hall into Regent Street in silence. It had crossed Dr. Slade-Fenton's mind more than once in the course of the evening that his partner's words were even unusually few; and the elder man's lips were just parted to utter something conventional as to cabs and their respective ways, when North, with a glance up at the sky, said deliberately,—

“Are you inclined to walk home? It's a fine night.”

Dr. Slade-Fenton had not reached his present position in the medical profession without the assistance of powers of perception considerably above the average. He would have risked a considerable stake at that moment on his conviction that the suggestion thus put into words was not complete in itself, but contained a definite desire on North's part for speech with him. He, too, glanced amicably at the sky and said,—

“A good idea, really. And our ways lie together for some distance. Let us walk by all means.”

They walked along Regent Street at a good pace, the conversation being almost entirely sustained by the elder man. But when they turned into quieter streets, Dr. Slade-Fenton fell silent and a pause ensued. It was broken, much to his companion's secret self-satisfaction, by North Branston.

"Slade-Fenton," he said, "I think it is due to our relations to one another that you should hear from myself, and at once, that I am going to be married."

He had spoken so composedly, in a tone so little in consonance, to his hearer's mind, with the words, that the sense of astonishment created in Dr. Slade-Fenton by those words themselves was intensified into something approaching momentary stupefaction.

"Married!" echoed Dr. Slade-Fenton. "Married! My dear fellow, you—you astound me."

A smile touched the corners of North's mouth.

"Yes!" he assented. "Of course."

"But you also delight me!" continued his partner, beginning to recover himself. "You delight me more than I can say. Going to be married! My dear Branston, I'm charmed to hear it, inexpressibly charmed! A wife and an establishment! The only qualification you needed further. And the lady, my dear fellow, who is the lady?"

"Lady Karlake."

If Dr. Slade-Fenton had ever shared his wife's desire with reference to Dr. Branston and Miss Kenderdine, he had long since realized that they were desires not destined to be gratified. And higher hopes than he had ever entertained would hardly have interfered with his complete satisfaction over the match thus announced to him by his partner. Lady Karlake had money, she had brains, she was well known and popular in the London world. She was, in short, an acquisition to the firm such as he could hardly have hoped for. He expressed himself accordingly; not with a bald revelation of his rapture, but with a discretion and delicacy much to be admired.

"I congratulate you, Branston!" he said, stopping and holding out his hand with a fine gesture of regard.

"One of the most charming women I know. I congratulate you."

"Thanks!" said North with composure.

"Will it be soon?" continued Dr. Slade-Fenton, with a rather admiring sense of his partner's imperturbability.

"Probably," returned North.

"And is the news public property, or am I to understand that I hear it in confidence?"

Dr. Slade-Fenton asked the question with his blandest smile, and North replied with a slight gesture of negation.

"You are the first to hear it," he said; "but there is no secret about it."

They had come to the point where their roads diverged, and he stopped as he spoke. He received Dr. Slade-Fenton's cordial and congratulatory parting words with characteristic coolness and went on his way alone.

The gas was burning low in his room when he reached home; he turned it up mechanically and then stood motionless, looking straight before him with dark, absent eyes. A change had come to his face in the interval which had elapsed since his parting with Dr. Slade-Fenton. It was still composed, and its normal expression was by no means wholly in abeyance; but there was that about it which suggested thoughts and feelings by which their experience was almost puzzled.

North Branston had said truly to Lady Karslake that in all those years of his manhood which were past, no thought of the possibility of love or marriage, where he himself was concerned, had ever entered into his head. What sad suggestion of a warped or undeveloped nature; what hints, grimmer yet, of an all-penetrating sense of isolation, of an instinctive non-expectancy of happiness; that truth contained, it is not possible to say. He was a **man**, and in the book of his life there was a page which

bore the record of a certain period in his early manhood when he had lived a man's life. He had turned that page contemptuously and decisively. It was not in keeping with his temperament. And in turning it he had turned his back, as he believed for ever, on womanhood. Self-revelation had come to him suddenly, touched into life inexplicably, mysteriously, touched into life by the hand of a strange magician—Olive Kenderdine. He had entered the Slade-Fentons' house on that evening, now a fortnight ago, when he had dined there, troubled and heavy-hearted, penetrated through and through with the recollection of Lady Karslake and her trouble, unable to rid himself of the impression she had made upon him. He had left it blinded and stunned by the consciousness of what it was that lay behind his thought of her and his pity for her ; dazed and stupefied by his first realization of the presence within himself of a force hitherto utterly unsuspected. As he stood face to face with Miss Kenderdine, and heard the woman of whom his pitying thoughts were full, belittled and made light of by her sneering tongue, a flash of instantaneous conviction had lighted up those thoughts of his once and for all ; and he knew what love might mean.

North Branston's was a strong nature ; strong in what was worst in it, as it might have been strong on other and finer lines.

Scathing self-contempt, bitter derision, and self-suppression, constituted his first impulse. All that was narrowest and hardest in his nature rose up instinctively to wither what was so incompatible with itself. But there was that in him, stultified, half smothered by his daily life, which, nevertheless, responded to the new movement, which fed it and reinforced it and made it strong to do battle. Slowly and with infinite reluctance North had realized that the unfathomable feeling with which he

was struggling with such fierce contempt was not to be dominated ; slowly and with infinite reluctance he had realized that it must work its will.

He had submitted gradually and painfully, and then the struggle had changed its ground. The slow torture of doubt had ensued, torture complicated by the reluctance under the influence of which one half of the man despised the suffering of the other half. He might submit ; he might acknowledge and accept the new element in his life ; but the last word was not with him to speak. The character which that element was finally to assume ; whether it was to be an added root of bitterness, or whether it was to assume proportions of so strange a nature that his unaccustomed eyes could hardly trace the shape that glimmered with ever-changing lights before him, was an issue over which he was absolutely powerless.

And now it was all over. The tumult of struggle had passed into victory ; the ground swell of doubt had subsided into absolute calm. As he stood there in his silent room, motionless and absorbed, he was confronting a new phase of his existence, a phase in which life and the world remained for him the half contemptible, half futile riddle to which he had long since hardened himself, but in which one personal factor was changed.

For as long as consciousness had existed in him North Branston had lived among his fellow-men alone. He was to live for the future in close communion with one out of all the world. Sympathy, in that large sense of the word including give and take, had been denied him. It was comprised for him in the future in one woman's personality. Love had passed him by. It had come to him now in the guise of that all-absorbing emotion which, existing between man and woman, isolates them in dual solitude. It was a change which, introduced thus

into a scheme of life in which nothing else was changed ; being complete in itself and exercising no harmonizing or enlightening influence upon the elements by which it was surrounded ; stood out sharp and distinct, cutting off the past from the future as with an absolutely tangible boundary line. He stood there, as it were, between the two, on that mysterious and shifting vantage ground, the present, and let the time to come unroll itself before him.

He moved at last slowly and mechanically, and sat down by the table, supporting his head on his hand. The future may attract us and fascinate us, but the past is a part of ourselves, and dominates us. Inevitably and involuntarily, North Branston's thoughts had turned from one to the other. The future centred for him in one woman ; Lady Karlake. The past centred for him in one woman ; Mrs. Vallotson.

During the two years that had passed since he had left Alnchester, he and Mrs. Vallotson had not met. Brief notes only had passed between them at long and irregular intervals. He looked back now across those silent months, and out of the years beyond the hard, dark personality so sinister to him rose up and filled his thoughts ; he looked back and confronted it, and a vague and softening mist gathered about it—who shall say whether the mist of distance, or an emanation from that future into which the vantage ground of present slipped with every breath he drew ? The life which she had shadowed seemed to recede even as he looked at it. The bitterness which the one woman had created for him was neutralized by this strange sweetness brought to him by the other. The isolation engendered by Mrs. Vallotson passed into abeyance in the isolation which Lady Karlake was to share. The chain which no personal effort could break seemed to have yielded

gradually and insensibly to the fusion of time and circumstance.

No definite statement of this thought presented itself to North Branston. His meditations were, rather, permeated by it. And out of it there grew, little by little, an instinct towards some such materialization of the new relations thus rendered possible between himself and Mrs. Vallotson, as might be involved in the suspension of that cold silence preserved between them.

He rose and began to pace slowly up and down the room. With the disappearance of the chain that held them together, the preservation of the distance created by separation seemed to him to have lost its reason. That friendly intercourse could ever be possible between them he neither supposed nor desired. But some kind of courteous communication might be established ; something which would recognize those early obligations which North never forgot ; while ignoring all the rest. It was his marriage which was to complete the work of time in breaking up the old position. The announcement of his engagement was an occasion which lent itself naturally to the establishment of such intercourse as was vaguely present to his mind. The idea which had presented itself to him was a very natural idea, under the circumstances ; whether it should or should not be carried into effect, seemed a question hardly worth such restless consideration as gradually expressed itself in his face. Should he go down to Alnchester and announce his intention in person ? It mattered very little, on the surface, whether he went or no. But there are impulses and motive powers in all of us which work below the surface ; which weigh apparently trivial questions in unsuspected balances ; and by such hidden forces the question at issue in North's mind was being debated. He paused in his walk at last, and flung himself into his

chair with a strange, half-reluctant sigh. He had decided to go to Alnchester for a night, and announce his intention in person.

And even as he came to the decision, even as he put away from him for ever, save as a memory, the chain which had galled him so long, that chain was close about him still ; closer and more all-compelling in that its weight was no longer realized. The chain had formed the man's character ; as it had twisted him, so he had grown. He had brought its weight with him from his Alnchester life to his life in London, and it had killed his ambition, and cankered his success. All that was strongest in him now—the cynicism, the pessimism in which the last two years had confirmed him ; the narrow limitation which seemed to be settling down even upon that dissatisfaction which might have led him on to better things—were the outcome of its relentless pressure, Created by it with the first dawn of his childish consciousness ; fostered by it throughout the struggle of his youth ; confirmed by it in the unspeakable bitterness of the realization with which the very freedom of his manhood had come to him. Even his love was subject to its malignant influence. Sombre in tone, concentrated and uninspiring, destitute utterly of that all-pervading light which love—that least imperfect reflex which we know of perfect light—should diffuse throughout man's nature ; even his love was inevitably determined in character by the mould in which his mind had thus been cast. Unknown, unsuspected as it might be, the chain which bound him was inextricably entwined with his very existence. It stretched across the boundary line which lay across his life and linked the future to the past.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"CONNIE, you can't wear the lace on your yellow dress again. I said so last time you had it on. What are you going to do about it?"

Mrs. Vallotson had brought her vigorous presence into the dining-room for the express purpose of asking the question, and she paused for the answer just inside the door. It was only half-past ten in the morning, but the July day was already very hot; and Constance, the only occupant of the room, was sitting by the table, with some needlework before her, in a rather listless attitude. It was an attitude—as it was an occupation—which the Constance of two years before would utterly have scouted; but the Constance of two years before seemed to have undergone considerable modification in the interval. The alert air of superiority had degenerated into an expression of supercilious dissatisfaction; the assured self-confidence into a resentful and enforced quiescence. Constance had entered the lists with her mother on the subject of the regeneration of Alnchester. She had come off conquered instead of conqueror, and the low opinion which she had consequently found herself obliged to form of her mother's intellect, by no means militated against—or sweetened—her enforced realization of her mother's strength of character. Defeat and enforced idleness are naturally trying to an individual who feels that the world is the worse for her inaction. Moreover, one may be clearly aware of the

impossibility of regarding a certain friend in any other than a friendly light, and yet one may find life a trifle the duller for that friend's absence.

During the month which had preceded Bryan Armitage's departure from Alnchester, Constance had snubbed him, ignored him, and quarrelled with him ; loftily consigning to oblivion the question and answer which had passed between them at that ball, on which so many results had ensued. But it was not to be denied, nevertheless, that since then Constance had grown a little thin and pale.

She took up her work as Mrs. Vallotson spoke, and shook her head indifferently.

If time had not dealt very kindly with Constance, it seemed to have laid a rather invigorating than depressing finger upon her mother. Mrs. Vallotson had risen from her illness of two years ago with some such change upon her as might have been apparent in a woman who had passed through an acute crisis, either physical or mental. It would have been difficult to say—such characteristics having always been so pronounced in her—that she was harder, more dominating, more assured ; but her whole personality seemed to have become accentuated. She had aged, Alnchester said, perceptibly ; but it was the age that ingrains and confirms, and in no sense the age that relaxes or enfeebles.

As she stood now, looking down at her daughter, the alteration in her personality, which thus made itself vaguely apparent in her general manner and demeanour, was just traceable in her face. Her hair had grown grey, and there were lines about her eyes. But the eyes themselves were keen, and even peremptory, in their commanding glance. There were lines about the mouth, but they in no wise interfered with the unconscious

air of material well-being which was the dominant expression of the whole countenance.

She scanned her daughter's languid figure, and then spoke decidedly.

"Come, rouse yourself, child," she said. "You must wear the dress this evening, and something must be done to it first."

"It's too hot for concerts," said the girl, with weary superciliousness.

She was engaged to go that evening to a concert with some friends in the town.

"It's not the most sensible way of spending a July evening," returned her mother. "I told you that when you accepted. But, as you have accepted, of course you must go. Black lace would look nice after all that white. That friend of Mrs. Elliott's had a very pretty dress trimmed with black lace."

"I don't like black lace, mother."

"Have you anything else to propose? No? Then I don't see that you've any alternative, and there's no time to lose. I'm going down into the city. Go and put on your hat, and I'll go with you to buy it. The walk will do you good."

Constance hesitated a moment, and then she rose listlessly. She had come to the conclusion that it was undignified to argue about trifles. It was a conclusion which was less acutely painful to her than a recognition of the fact that the weight of her mother's determination, even in trifles, was not to be resisted.

She made no attempt, however, to conclude her preparations for her walk with any despatch. She dawdled and dreamed until she found herself quite surprised at receiving no call, more or less peremptory. She went downstairs, and coming from the dining-room she met the housemaid, hurried and subdued.

Constance pushed open the dining-room door and went in.

Mrs. Vallotson was still in her indoor dress. The second post had arrived, and beside her on the table lay an open letter. She turned abruptly as Constance entered.

"Oh, you're ready, child!" she said shortly. "That's all right. You'll have to do my commission for me. I shan't be able to come out."

"Why not, mother?"

"There's a letter from North. He is coming down this evening to stay until to-morrow."

The statement was as brief as possible, and it sounded even more curt than it was by reason of the sharp note which had appeared in Mrs. Vallotson's voice. A slight darkness and disturbance had fallen upon her face, and she moved across to the writing-table as Constance exclaimed,—

"Coming down! How surprising! One would have thought that he had forgotten our very existence!"

The girl spoke rather tartly; she was in no mood to approve of any action on the part of any of her fellow-creatures; and her mother's statement contained for her the very casual and hurried fulfilment by North of a long-deferred duty. She paused a moment for a mental amplification of her unfavourable criticism of him, and then observing that her mother was making a list of her requirements, she said,—

"But I don't see why North's coming should keep you at home this morning, mother. There's surely nothing to do but to tell Sarah to get the spare bedroom ready?"

"I must see that it is properly done," was the curt response. "The room will have to be thoroughly turned out. Make haste now, Connie. The things from the greengrocer's are wanted this morning."

The spare room, like every other corner in Mrs. Vallotson's house, was always in spotless order. Constance was quite convinced that a guest could have been ushered in on a very few moments' notice. But she was also quite convinced that, if her mother had decided to make a day's work of the preparation for North's arrival, expostulation was waste of time. She therefore departed on her errands ; her listlessness somewhat dissipated by the stimulus which her critical faculty had received. Even her engagement for the evening had acquired an interest in her eyes. It was very well that North should understand that the whole household was not to be at his beck and call at a moment's notice.

The servants came to the conclusion, during the course of a morning's work severely superintended by their mistress, that Mrs. Vallotson was not "best pleased at Dr. Branston's coming down so unexpected ;" and that that was the reason why she was making such a "turn out" about the preparations for his reception. And Dr. Vallotson, when the fact of North's prospective arrival was laid before him at luncheon, found himself rather perplexed as to his point of view with reference thereto.

Personally Dr. Vallotson was rather pleased than otherwise. His dislike for North had been an affair of habit, created originally he hardly knew how, fostered by their business relation. But now that the young man was no longer a daily thorn in his flesh, Dr. Vallotson was vaguely aware that North was a successful man, and was by no means blind to that reflected light with which the connections of a successful man may shine. For his own part, therefore, he was ready to receive his visitor with cordiality, and to express satisfaction in the prospect of his arrival.

It was, however, an indirect testimony to the increase of power about Mrs. Vallotson, that her husband, while he grew increasingly pompous and self-satisfied in his relation with the world at large, seemed to grow correspondingly meeker in his relation with his wife. He was loth to commit himself, now, without a lead, and in the brief words in which the communication was made to him he looked for a lead in vain.

"Coming down for a night?" he said majestically, but with entirely non-committal emphasis. "Really? Dear me, it is a long time since we saw him!"

"Yes."

The response was monosyllabic, but since it was entirely destitute of expression it certainly contained no reprobation, and Dr. Vallotson took courage.

"You have been making preparations for his arrival, my dear?" he said. "It seems almost a pity that he cannot stay a little longer, doesn't it? He is a busy man, though; a busy man and a very successful man, too."

"So it seems."

It was the same dry, inexpressive tone, and Dr. Vallotson shook his head dubiously.

"Ah!" he observed sententiously. "He learned a great deal under me—a great deal more than he is aware of, I've no doubt. Well!" Dr. Vallotson's voice took a tolerant tone. "We shall be glad to see him. We shall be glad to see him."

Without answering her husband, Mrs. Vallotson turned abruptly to Constance.

"Connie," she said, "you must send a note to say that you won't be able to go to the concert to-night."

Constance started indignantly.

"Why not, mother?" she asked argumentatively. "Because of North? Really, I don't see why that

should keep me at home ! He should have given us longer notice."

"I can't help that !" returned her mother harshly. "As he is only to be here one night, of course you must be at home."

"But, mother, I don't want—"

Lunch was over, and Mrs. Vallotson rose.

"Don't argue, Constance !" she said. "I wish you to stop at home !"

She might be compelled to stop at home, or rather she might decline to contest the point ; but, that North should quite understand her opinion of his sudden visit, the girl was all the more determined. She had not known, indeed, until she sat down to write the note which her mother dictated to her, how utterly she condemned the bad taste of his proceedings. She established herself in her own room, determined to deny herself afternoon tea—in time for which function North was expected—and to appear only at dinner.

But Constance had reckoned without her host. At about a quarter past four the parlour-maid knocked at her door. Her mistress had sent her, she said, to ask when Miss Vallotson was coming down. Miss Vallotson had rather a headache, it appeared, and was not coming down. The servant departed, but she returned almost immediately. Her mistress said Miss Vallotson was to come down at once, please. Miss Vallotson hesitated a moment, and then with her small pointed chin in the air she descended.

Mrs. Vallotson was sitting alone in the drawing-room. She did not even look up as the girl came in, taking her appearance, under the circumstances, as the merest matter of course. Constance crossed the room and sat down by the open window without a word. A quarter

of an hour passed in unbroken silence. Then Mrs. Vallotson deliberately folded her work, and laid it on the table.

Constance had heard nothing ; but the next instant the door opened, and Dr. Vallotson and North Branston came in together.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE evening was nearly over. North Branston was standing on the hearthrug, a transitory position into which an abrupt movement had carried him some minutes before, facing Dr. Vallotson, who was favouring him with a pompous recital of a civic difficulty. Rather behind North sat Mrs. Vallotson, knitting steadily, as she had been doing for the last hour and a half. Constance was established at the extreme end of the room, apparently absorbed in the intricacies of a piece of embroidery.

Except for certain little contemptuous lights which came and went about his mouth, North's countenance was as impassive as a man's may be. His pose, as he stood leaning one shoulder against the mantelpiece, was indifferently attentive, and a trifle constrained.

He had been five hours in Dr. Vallotson's house, and before the first five minutes had passed he had been aware that his visit was a futility and a mistake. How and by what means the consciousness had been brought home to him, he hardly knew or cared to know. Dr. Vallotson had received him with a pompous effusiveness for which he had not been prepared, and which had as little effect upon him as had the freezing demeanour of Constance.

Mrs. Vallotson's reception of him had been characterized by just that measure of stiff civility that she would have accorded to a stranger. She had spoken

little, seeming to impose upon herself of set purpose a rigid neutrality of demeanour. It seemed to be even in spite of herself that her contact with North Branston created as of old an atmosphere of constraint and unexpressed antagonism, and it was in spite of himself that North Branston realized that atmosphere. He had been resisting its influence all the evening, sneering at the oppression it produced in him, sneering at the bitter sense of frustration of which he was conscious. Urged by the cynical half contempt that was his most prominent sensation, he had roused himself to talk cleverly and flippantly. But as he stood now, with his eyes absently fixed on Dr. Vallotson, he was intensely conscious of the silent woman's figure seated a little behind him, motionless save for the incessant movement of the hands.

At the sound of her voice he started slightly, and turned his head involuntarily, though Dr. Vallotson was still speaking. Mrs. Vallotson was not addressing him, however. Constance at the other end of the room was placing her work materials in the little silk bag that hung on her frame, and her mother spoke to her in a low but rather sharply-pitched voice.

"What are you putting your things away for, Constance?" she said. "Are you going to bed?"

Constance had finished her preparations, and she rose as she answered, speaking like her mother in a low tone, that seemed to shut out the two men, and isolate the mother and daughter in a mutual confidence.

"Yes, mother," she said. "It's half-past ten."

The quick movement of Mrs. Vallotson's hands was suspended for a moment. She glanced at the clock, and then at her daughter, intending apparently to utter an imperious objection.

Then she hesitated. Her expression changed; she

fastened her knitting needles securely into her ball of wool and rose abruptly.

"Very well," she said. "We will both go."

In spite of the undertone in which this dialogue had been carried on, Dr. Vallotson's flow of speech had faltered on his wife's first word, and now, as Mrs. Vallotson and her daughter turned towards them, the two men met them in silence.

"Constance and I are going to say good-night," said Mrs. Vallotson formally. "You and North will like to smoke, of course."

She addressed her husband, but it was North who answered. Constance, with her most dignified demeanour, had moved forward to say good-night to him, and as he just touched the hand that she held out to him, he said,—

"I won't detain Constance for a moment. But if you can wait a little, Adelaide, I should like to speak to you."

Mrs. Vallotson paused, facing him across Constance's small dark head. For an instant their eyes met, and an odd shudder ran through him ; one of those strange and unaccountable jarrings of the nerves which make the old superstition as to a footstep on the waiting grave so comprehensible. Then with a tacit movement of assent Mrs. Vallotson deliberately reseated herself. North waited in silence while Constance bade her father good-night, and conveyed her superior presence out of the room. Then he turned to Mrs. Vallotson.

Before he could speak, however, Mrs. Vallotson forestalled him. She was sitting very erect, one clenched hand lying on the table beside her.

"Robert," she said harshly, "I don't imagine that North's communication, whatever it may be, is likely to interest you. His private affairs needn't trouble you. You may as well go on to the smoking-room."

Dr. Vallotson hesitated, and looked dubiously towards North. There was that in his wife's tone which made it distinctly undesirable that he should remain ; but within his own breast there was a lively curiosity that made it distinctly undesirable that he should withdraw. Before he could commit himself, however, North Branston interposed.

"My private affairs need trouble no one, thank you, Adelaide," he said ; "and if Dr. Vallotson will wait half a minute, I will go with him to the smoking-room. I only wanted to tell you that I am engaged to be married, and that my wedding will take place in about six weeks."

He had made the communication in quite other tones and in other words than those which he had intended. Spoken as he had spoken it now, it had assumed the character of an uncompromising defiance. But its effect upon Mrs. Vallotson was hardly such as might have been expected. With so sharp a turn of her head, and so strange a change in her eyes, as seemed in some odd way to convey the exclamation that she did not utter, she looked from her husband to North Branston. She gazed at the latter in silence for about a moment, and then her clenched hand slowly relaxed.

"You are engaged to be married !" she said slowly. "To be married !"

"I am really delighted to hear it," said Dr. Vallotson, with tentative effusion. "Delighted, indeed ! In our profession, my dear boy, a man ought to marry. It's positively necessary that he should marry if he is to attain any position. I hope you've done as well for yourself in this as in other ways."

Mrs. Vallotson had paused, and her husband's speech had filled up an apparent gap in the conversation ; but neither his wife nor North took the faintest notice of him.

They were not looking at one another. Mrs. Vallotson was looking straight before her, and North was gloomily regarding the carpet at his feet ; but each seemed to be oblivious of any other presence than the other's.

"Have you been engaged long ? " said Mrs. Vallotson.

"Two days," returned North.

"And you are to be married ? "

"In about six weeks," said North.

There was another pause, and this time Dr. Vallotson did not attempt to fill it in. Then Mrs. Vallotson rose, resting one hand rather heavily on the table. She looked straight at North, and in her face there was an extraordinary blending of the old repulsion with a strange, unconscious softening.

"I hope you will be happy," she said slowly.

With a quick involuntary movement, moved he hardly knew why or how, North Branston crossed the space that divided them, and caught her hand.

"Thank you, Adelaide," he said, a little hoarsely.

She had drawn her hand away from him, and was turning almost unconsciously as it seemed towards the door, when Dr. Vallotson's voice broke the moment's silence,—

"And who is the lady ? " he said, with pompous suavity. "You haven't told us that yet. Who is the lady ? "

Mrs. Vallotson, close to the door, paused and turned back.

"Yes," she said. "What is her name ? "

North moved abruptly. A dull red flush crept over his forehead.

"You know the name," he said. "You know her personally. I don't know whether it will surprise you or not, but I'm going to marry Sir William Karlake's widow."

What the sound was that turned them simultaneously towards the door ; whether it was a hoarse cry, a stifled groan, or merely a terrible inarticulate rattle in the throat, neither of the two men ever knew. Looking towards the door, they saw Mrs. Vallotson recoiled against it, one hand clutching at the handle, the other dropped nerveless at her side, staring at North Branston with eyes that stood out wide and burning from a drawn and livid face.

Before either man could speak, almost before they had fully realized the change which had come upon her, with an effort of will so tremendous that its action seemed to turn her face into a stone mask, Mrs. Vallotson regained her self-command. She stood there motionless, still gazing at North Branston, but a singular haze seemed to have fallen over her burning eyes.

"Have you kept up with that woman ever since you left Alnchester?" she said.

Her voice was dull and toneless, like the voice of a woman walking in her sleep.

North Branston's lips tightened and his eyes gleamed ominously. His voice as he responded was rigidly measured and self-controlled.

"Adelaide," he said, "I don't want to quarrel with you. I came down with quite another end in view. But you must be careful what you say. You made a mistake eighteen months ago ; you said things I don't care to remember. Don't go back on them."

"Was there an understanding between you before her husband died?"

She had spoken in precisely the same expressionless tone ; but as she finished, her own words seemed to rouse her. Ghastly grey shadows had gathered about her mouth, and as she put up her hand and pushed the grey hair from her temples, on which there stood great drops

of moisture, her hand was shaking like a leaf. She moved with abrupt, uncertain steps, and sat down heavily. She did not look at North, whose face was darkened, on her words, into the rigidity of unutterable contempt.

"You cannot marry her," she said.

The atmosphere which had weighted the whole evening had developed itself at last; developed and declared itself. It seemed to rise and fill the room like a tangible blackness, a fitting setting for those two dark, set faces. They were alone together. Dr. Vallotson had left the room unnoticed; unnoticed as he would have been had he remained.

"Why not?"

The words contained no temporizing. They simply passed to the consummation of the situation, demanding that declaration which, at the same time, they utterly defied. Mrs. Vallotson met them with an uncompromising determination which was the very counterpart of that which faced her. But she was gripping the table heavily as she spoke, and the coarse power of her personality seemed to labour as under an overwhelming disability.

"It would be a scandal," she said. She seemed to breathe with difficulty. "All Alnchester talked of your relations to one another two years ago. Marriage between you would justify the worst that was said of you."

North Branston strode across the room and faced her, looking down at her with his white face working with passion.

"Adelaide," he said, "stop! You're saying what you know to be untrue. Speak out. Say that you have a grudge against the woman who is all that you are not. Say that you disliked her from the moment you saw her.

Say that your infernal love of power is loth to see me escape from the intolerable loneliness you've created for me. Say that it's your will, alone, that is against my marriage."

As though his words in their uncompromising defiance had penetrated through the weight that hung about her, touching the dominant chord of her nature, Mrs. Vallotson rose to her feet, confronting him. Her tall, strong figure seemed to expand and dilate ; her face was suffused with colour, her eyes were bloodshot and wild. Coarse as her strength was in its unrestrained manifestation, there was a desperation in that sudden gathering of herself together which gave to her instinctive self-assurance a touch of magnificence.

"So be it," she cried. "It is against my will ! Once and for all I tell you so ! It shall not be. The woman you have chosen is no fit wife for you. You shall not marry her."

North Branston looked into her eyes and answered her.

"I shall marry her ! " he said.

"With my consent, never ! "

"Without it, then ! "

A short, fierce laugh broke from him, and on the instant she stretched out her hand and laid it on his arm, gripping it with fingers of steel.

"Look back," she said hoarsely. "Look back over your life, and then say if you dare. If you defy me now, it is for the last time. I will never see you again. I will never hear your name mentioned. I will wipe you out of my life for ever. You owe me everything, you owe this woman nothing. Choose between us."

They were close together. The hot breath of each was on the other's face. The white heat of passion was throbbing at North Branston's heart, and he smiled.

"I do choose," he said. "You've thwarted me from first to last, I might have known you'd thwart me now! We hate each other, you and I—God knows the reason. We'll cut our lives asunder from to-night."

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CHAPTER XXIX.

THE softly falling dusk of the August evening was stealing slowly on, filling the room with shadows ; the soft night wind floated in at the open window, stirring the curtains and draperies ; it was nearly eight o'clock, and still Lady Karslake did not ring for lights—did not even move. She was lying back in a big chair by the window, a rather ghostly-looking figure in a soft white gown ; her hands were clasped above her head ; her eyes were fixed upon the evening sky, and in their depths there was a light as of intense life, which contrasted sharply with the serene blue, growing more tranquil moment by moment, on which they rested.

To go through life with no sense of its riddle is given only to the very callous and the very dull of fibre. The degree to which man is distressed and rendered restless by its unsolved presence—when once that presence is recognized—is determined by the greater or less predominance in the individual of that mysterious quality which we call "soul," "spirit," "spiritual affinity," each according to our particular formula. Into Eve Karslake's life the sense of that riddle had penetrated, quietly, insidiously, along the most commonplace lines of a perfectly smooth and easy existence. Her husband's death had made no terrible gash in her life, but it had altered her position. It gave her absolute independence. Perhaps to her sensitive and essentially womanly nature independence itself brought with it a touch of loneliness ;

certainly it is not possible for any human being to pass on from one phase of existence to the other without a sense, more or less definite, more or less chilling, of the irretrievableness of time, of the inevitable progress of life, of the inevitable end. Lady Karslake was quite unconscious of any such thoughts ; they would have struck her as rather humorous in connection with herself. But they were not without their effect upon her, nevertheless. In the year that followed her husband's death something of her zest of life died out. She learned to know the meaning of the words weariness and satiety. She had begun to ask questions and to get no answers. And the change in her expression was the material result.

It was not in her to accept the new factor in her life and to become in time oblivious of it. It made her restless and wretched. She dealt with it in many ways. She denied it ; laughed at it ; analyzed it. She made sundry attempts to find the answer to it ; notable among which was her late philanthropic experiment. But each attempt seemed only a greater failure than its predecessor, and left her, as she had told North Branston, in worse case than before.

And now the haunting riddle was swept out of her life. Not answered—the riddle of life is never wholly answered but by death—but obliterated. The whole condition of life was altered for her. She stood in the midst of a flood of light, that blinded her to the existence of everything but itself. All her faculties, quickened and stimulated as they had never been before, were absorbed in the source of their quickening to the exclusion of any other sense.

Love had come late to Eve Karslake. It had come unsought, unrecognized until it burst suddenly into full bloom. The old interest in, and sympathy with, North Branston, of the Alnchester days, had stood as it were

between her and any knowledge of her development. Their relations in London, had she ever thought about them—and she never did think about them, being by no means a woman of an introspective turn of mind—would have seemed to her merely their Alnchester relations, developed as time had developed them both. North Branston had spoken; and, in the flood of realization which his words let loose upon her, all that had been between them was merged for ever for her in that which was to be.

The supreme woman's impulse, wakened at last, throbbed for the first time in the very maturity of the woman's nature. It thrilled through the whole woman, informing every instinct, every characteristic, with itself. It possessed her as only such a temperament can be possessed by love. Every thought, every impulse was concentrated in it. All her previous perceptions were absorbed in it. The pity and the sympathy which he had hitherto created in her were swamped and borne away as by a flood. They belonged to an imperfect state of things; they belonged to the whole life of dissatisfaction and regret with which they passed into abeyance. A new heaven and a new earth seemed to have been created for her in which he and she were to dwell absolutely alone, absolutely satisfied in one another.

No woman's soul can pass through such a transformation lightly or tranquilly. To Eve Karslake, the two days which had followed on her realization had been days of tumult not to be described. Every form of acute feeling possible to such a woman so situated had possessed her and shaken her. Doubt and distrust; distrust of herself; distrust of that other who was to be her world; a quivering dread of that great sea on the brink of which she stood; a burning something too intense for joy, too exquisite for fear; all these ran high in her, and had their way.

Then slowly but surely the first tempestuous tide of feeling began to subside.

Helped by North's temporary absence at Alnchester, her pulses settled gradually into their new beat. She began to live, instead of being tossed hither and thither by the emotion of each moment.

She was waiting for North Branston now, as she sat by her drawing-room window with her eyes on the evening sky ; waiting for him for the second time only since he had asked her to be his wife ; waiting for him for the first time with perfect satisfaction and unalloyed anticipation. She had received a telegram in the middle of the day saying that he would be detained by professional business until late. She had returned an impulsive answer to the effect that she should wait dinner for him. She had come into the drawing-room shortly after seven, and she had not moved since.

The last light of day faded from the quiet sky, the peaceful glow of summer darkness filled the sky, but the room was in complete shadow. The door opened suddenly, and an electric quiver shot through the womanly figure by the window. With the colour sweeping over her face in one hot, lovely rush, Lady Karlake rose without a word and stretched out both her hands towards the figure coming to her through the dimness. North Branston paused for an instant, almost as though startled. Then, also without a word but with an odd abruptness of movement, he took her in his arms.

She yielded to his touch with a self-abandonment as womanly as it was complete, but as his hold relaxed at last she drew herself away with an involuntary sigh. There had been an intensity in his touch which had made it almost painful. He caught the slight sound instantly.

"I'm too rough," he said, and his voice was harsh and bitter. "I beg your pardon."

She caught his hand and drew it round her, resting softly against his shoulder.

"No," she said, "don't !"

They were only two words, but spoken as she spoke them, they held that which further speech could only have spoiled. She stood so, her whole personality absorbed, as her absolute stillness testified, in the perfect sensation of the moment ; and North stood holding her, and looked down at the delicate outline of her face in silence. Perhaps his silence was not what she expected—unconscious as she was of any expectation. Perhaps his touch, deprived of its intensity, seemed vaguely insufficient. After a moment or two she stirred and raised herself. Her voice, as she spoke, low and sweet, seemed to carry with it her intense sense of the newness of the position.

"Did you think I should be glad to see you ?" she said. "Have you looked forward to this ?"

"Yes !"

His voice was so deep as to be almost grim, and as he spoke the monosyllable one hand closed over the slender white fingers that lay on his breast, holding them as in a vice. The pressure half hurt her, as the force with which his brief response was weighted half frightened her, but she gave herself up to the moment and let its feeling fill her. She looked into his face, the colour coming and going in her own as she breathed, her eyes like stars.

"How strong you are !" she said. "How you hold me ! Shall you hold me like this always ?"

"Always, so help me God !"

The words broke from North Branston with a vibration which contrasted almost harshly with the tone of the question. A thrill ran through her, and the fingers

in his hand seemed to shrink. He released them abruptly, and at that instant the gong sounded. The sound, lightening the sudden strain, seemed to restore Lady Karlake to herself.

"Shall we go down?" she said, in that soft uncertain tone so eloquent of their new relation. They passed out of the dark drawing-room on to the brightly lighted staircase, and she went down before him, her movements swift and nervous in their unalterable grace. He had dined with her often before; but it is one of the mysterious properties of the change which had come upon them, that not the smallest incident of daily life is exempt from that first exquisite mist of the strange and unfamiliar in which the whole is enshrined.

It was not until they were seated at the dinner-table, not until some moments of dinner-table conversation had rendered the position less unreal, that Lady Karlake, glancing towards him with a trivial speech, saw North Branston's face fully for the first time that evening. Having glanced, she did not turn her eyes away instantly, and their expression gradually changed.

North was looking white and haggard; dark curves about his eyes gave them an added sombreness. Physical fatigue, so far, might have accounted for his appearance; but it was not the signs of physical fatigue that had arrested Lady Karlake's attention. There was a set defiance about his expression. He looked, not like a man satisfied and at rest, but like a man with war in his very soul.

He talked, during dinner, more than did Lady Karlake. A certain absent-mindedness seemed to have fallen upon her. And his talk was the talk of North Branston at his worst; clever, penetrated with cynicism and pessimism. More than once Lady Karlake put his words aside with a quick expression of distaste; more

than once she contradicted him impetuously ; and almost directly after the servants had left the room she started up, leaving the dining-room with a rapid word of invitation to follow her.

When he joined her in the drawing-room a little later, she was wandering restlessly about the room. She stopped and turned, as he opened the door.

"Come and sit here," she said, "by the window, and tell me how you have thriven at Alnchester."

She had let herself sink into her own chair, as she spoke, not looking at him ; and as his voice fell upon her ear she started slightly. Quiet as it was, it seemed to cut like steel.

"I have thriven at Alnchester as I might have expected to thrive. Not at all !"

She turned in her chair and looked at him. Then she said slowly,—

"I don't think I understand. Have they not got over your coming to town ? Were they not glad to see you ?"

A harsh laugh came from North, though he checked it instantly.

"No," he replied, "they were not glad to see me."

"That was abominable," she said. She had flushed a little. "Were they—" she hesitated, and her colour deepened ; "were they not interested to hear your news ?"

"No !" said North grimly.

Lady Karslake moved, pulling herself up in her chair, with her hands clasped on one of its arms.

"What do you mean ?" she said imperiously. "Were they—not pleased ?"

"No."

There was something in the one curt word, a suppressed intensity of feeling which had nothing to do with

her, before which Lady Karslake paused. She let herself sink back in her chair, the slender fingers of one outstretched hand still clasping its arm, her eyes fixed upon him with an inquiry, half surprised, half displeased, growing in their depths.

"Have you quarrelled with your sister?" she said.

North Branstons rose abruptly and stood against the frame of the open French window, looking at her with gloomy eyes that hardly seemed to see her.

"I have," he said, with sudden vehemence. "That's nothing new, Heaven knows. But it's final this time. We've done with one another at last."

"If I am the cause," said Lady Karslake, "I suppose I ought to say that I am sorry."

Her tone was rather curious; there was a sarcastic ring in it that was hardly in keeping with her actual words. North, however, hardly seemed to hear her; he was absorbed in his own thoughts; and after a moment she went on, her hand beating gently against the arm of her chair.

"I did not know that you were so fond of your sister. I did not know that you had so keen a sense of family ties."

He laughed harshly, and the restless movement of her hand quickened ominously.

"Family ties!" he said. "The only family tie I've known has been the curse of my life, that's all. It is not wonderful if my sense of it is keen. Fond of my sister! No, you could scarcely have known that!"

"And yet," she said quickly, "your quarrel with her has spoilt—this evening for you. You are not happy, you can't forget her, you can't get away from your remembrance of what has happened, even with me."

The play of expression on her face, as she lifted it to watch him, was eloquent of the wayward feeling so in-

separable from such a temperament as hers so newly strung its full pitch. But her expression hardly seemed to penetrate to North's understanding, though he looked down at her with a gaze that seemed for the first time to concentrate itself on her.

"Why do we talk of her?" he said, between his set teeth. "Why do we talk of her?"

Lady Karlake rose and began to move with nervous restlessness about the room.

"I choose to talk of her," she said impetuously. "I choose to understand you. If I am not everything to you, I am nothing! If I am everything to you, what does it matter if you quarrel with a hundred sisters?"

With the inevitable obtuseness of such a man where such a woman is concerned, North Branston failed to understand her drift even then. The chain that he had believed dissolved—that he had defied and repudiated—was dragging on him with an almost unendurable weight; and in some vague and inexplicable way her petulant words seemed to press home that which he was fiercely pushing from him.

"You don't know what you're talking of," he said. "For God's sake let's say no more."

"I do know what I'm talking of," she flashed out tempestuously; "or, if I don't, explain it to me! If the annoyance that your sister causes you is greater than your satisfaction in our meeting, then she is more to you than I am. How else can it be? You want me to believe you love me. You've made me say that I love you. Of what consequence, then, is anything else in the world? How can you be affected by any outside circumstance? How can you be made glad or sorry by anything that doesn't touch ourselves?"

He turned away moodily, leaning his arm on the window frame,

"You will be disappointed," he said gloomily, "if you think of love like that."

She broke into a little ironical laugh.

"You should have told me that before," she said. "We ought to have compared notes on the subject, for evidently we don't agree. What's your idea of love—if mine is wrong?"

He did not answer immediately. His face was dark and cynical, like the face of a man who finds himself goaded when he should have been soothed, and accepts the alternative as part of the irony of life.

"The love of a man and a woman," he said, "may be an island which keeps them from going under altogether, but the sea of care, and failure, and bitterness, is all about it, and the waves beat unceasingly upon its shores. They must make up their breakwaters untiringly, and they must not expect to find the task an easy one."

His words, or his tone, or both, seemed to give the final touch to that jarring of her sensitive emotions begun almost with his arrival. She turned upon him sharply, her eyes flashing.

"We differ wholesale!" she said vehemently. "What I call love is something that annihilates failure, and care, and disappointment; that isolates the two who live in it, and draws them out of touch with the world and all its pains. No other love than this is worth the name!"

She turned away scornfully, and walked blindly to the other side of the room.

There was a moment's pause. North Branston looked at her averted form heavily and uncertainly; then he passed his hand suddenly over his head, and his whole expression broke up. He strode across the room towards her.

"For Heaven's sake," he said hoarsely, "don't let us quarrel! We may call things by different names, but

there is something at the bottom stronger than our differences. Let us have patience with one another, for pity's sake."

There was a dead silence. He could see her fingers tearing nervously at her handkerchief. At last, slowly at first and almost reluctantly, she turned to him. She lifted her eyes to his, and impulsively stretched out her hands to him as bright tears started.

"Ah, no," she echoed hurriedly and piteously. "Don't—don't let us quarrel! If it is only an island, we are together on it, and we needn't listen—oh, we needn't listen—to the sound of the beating waves!"

CHAPTER XXX.

It was a glaring August day ; and Dr. Vallotson's physical discomfort, as he pottered pompously home across the town, by no means tended to restore a serenity of spirit which had been incontinently reft from him.

Mrs. Vallotson's conduct with reference to North Branston's proposed marriage had been accepted by her husband according to his custom ; but he had regarded it from the first with an unexpressed disapproval which was by no means customary in their relations. He regarded the connection with Lady Karslake as distinctly advantageous ; and a quarrel with North, who had begun to figure rather prominently in his conversation with acquaintances as a distinguished authority, vexed his soul. The facts of the engagement, and of Mrs. Vallotson's violent opposition to it, had crept out in the town ; Dr. Vallotson, mentioning the circumstance at home, had done so with a tentative and guilty air which left little doubt as to how the rumour had been started. And the doctor—his wife being absolutely unapproachable on the subject—had the matter mentioned to him on all hands. To find that the view taken by his interlocutors, one and all, was his own view, was, with a man of Dr. Vallotson's temperament, to inflame his opinion into an irritable opinionativeness which was all the more sore and self-conscious inasmuch as practical expression was denied it. On this particular August day an

incident had occurred which had put the final touch to that sense of resentment and reprobation which had been swelling in him during the past three weeks ; and it was hurrying him on to an act to which perhaps nothing else could have nerved him.

He pushed open the gate that led into his own garden, heated in body and considerably over-heated in mind, and saw his wife just disappearing through the open hall door. Dr. Vallotson quickened his steps and followed her. Mrs. Vallotson was half-way upstairs when he entered the house, and he went on after her to her room. Just within the threshold he paused, a trifle nervously. Mrs. Vallotson was standing motionless on the other side of the room, with her back towards him.

" Adelaide, my dear—"

Dr. Vallotson had begun with an accentuation of his usual pompousness which might have been intended to conceal a tremulousness which, now that he found himself in his wife's presence, asserted itself ; but he was cut short. It had not occurred to him as possible that Mrs. Vallotson should not have heard his step as he followed, but apparently such was the case. At the first sound of his voice she started violently, turning fiercely in the direction from which it came.

" Who is it ? " she said roughly. " What is it ? " Then, as though her jarred perceptions were gradually settling down, she seemed to become aware of her husband's presence, and a flush of violent anger rushed over her face.

" Why couldn't you call me, Robert ? " she exclaimed. " What do you mean by coming up behind me like that ? Don't you know by this time that I don't like that kind of thing ? Are my wishes of any consequence, or are they not ? "

The vehemence with which she spoke was so sudden,

so unexpected, so extraordinarily disproportionate to the occasion, that for the instant Dr. Vallotson could only gaze at her helplessly, while the resolution with which he was armed trembled in the balance. The instant passed ; the flagrant injustice of her indignation added its weight to the charges already formulated in his mind against her ; and prudence went to the winds. He drew himself up, inflating his chest portentously, as Mrs. Vallotson continued, with the same inexplicable passion,—

“What do you want ? If there’s anything you want done, why can’t you go to Constance ? I can’t see after everything. I never get a moment to myself from morning until night. What is it ? ”

“If you will allow me to speak,” returned Dr. Vallotson, with that indignant trembling of tone which invariably characterized his rare encounters with his wife, “I will explain in a very few words. I merely want a few minutes’ conversation with you, and I really fail to see that it is such an unreasonable request.”

“Well, go on.”

Dr. Vallotson cleared his throat and continued.

“The subject is not a pleasant one,” he said, “but I feel it my duty to open it. I cannot longer stand by to watch conduct which I—and not I alone—consider mistaken to the last degree, without offering some slight protest. I—I allude to the matter of your brother’s engagement.”

As he came at last to the point and stood committed, Dr. Vallotson had grown nervous, flustered, and consequently violent. And as he uttered his last words it seemed as though all the feeling of the moment had passed suddenly from the flushed, furious woman to the little self-conscious, agitated man. As though a sudden pall had been dropped over it, every shade of expression

faded from Mrs. Vallotson's face ; every trace of the burning colour died away, except where it lingered on her cheeks in two faint patches of red. Her pallor was ashen ; there were heavy shadows under her eyes ; and, seen thus in repose, there was a drawn fixity of expression in every line of her face. She looked like a woman consumed day and night by some hidden torture, and set to resist its ravages with the last breath in her body.

She turned deliberately away.

"I will not hear the subject mentioned," she said.

Under ordinary circumstances her tone would have terminated the conversation ; its only effect now was to add the intoxicating sense of reckless daring to Dr. Vallotson's unusual emotions.

"Pardon me, my dear," he said grandiloquently, "but I have something to say on the subject to which I must request you to listen. I feel that the time has come when we must arrive at an understanding."

"I will not hear the subject mentioned."

She spoke in precisely the same measured, inexorable tone, and the blood began to boil impotently in Dr. Vallotson's veins.

"But the subject is mentioned," he said. "It is mentioned in every house in Alnchester ! Every one in Alnchester is conversant with every detail of the arrangements except ourselves. Something has occurred this morning which has brought to a point beyond which I cannot suffer it to pass unmentioned the very painful concern under which I have laboured for some time." He paused, reinforcing himself with a wave of his pocket-handkerchief. "I will not attempt to point out to you what my chagrin has been," he continued, "I will not enlarge upon the painful impression produced upon the whole city. I will simply ask you, Adelaide, whether you consider it seemly that I should have to be informed

of the date fixed for the marriage of your brother at the hands of one of my own patients ! ”

Dr. Vallotson's emotion had touched its consummation at last. He had risen to his climax with all that swelling dignity of tone which keen personal sense of humiliation can produce, and he waited majestically for its effect.

No effect whatever seemed to have been produced.

Mrs. Vallotson did not turn round. The mechanical movements with which she was smoothing out her gloves had stopped suddenly, but that was all. At last, when her husband was beginning to doubt whether she had understood his words, she spoke.

“ When ? ” she said.

The word revived Dr. Vallotson's courage. “ When ? ” he returned with pained severity. “ When indeed, Adelaide ! I have only to ask you what could be more deplorable than the necessity for such a question ! It is to take place on the tenth of September. The information comes to me through Miss Baines, who heard it indirectly from Archdeacon French, who is to perform the ceremony.”

There was no answer. For a moment Mrs. Vallotson stood absolutely motionless ; then the movement of her fingers began again in silence.

The silence seemed to Dr. Vallotson to give him the advantage.

“ I feel,” he said loftily, “ that the deplorable incident forms a crisis, at which it is absolutely necessary that the matter should be represented to you in its true light. I have had some little opportunity of observing how this—this truly deplorable breach between yourself and North Branston is looked upon by our neighbours, and I cannot but know that your conduct in the matter—dictated in the first instance, as I am well aware, by a high sense of duty—is condemned. It is generally

agreed that your original protest is much to be applauded, but that the time has come for reconciliation."

Dr. Vallotson paused. He was out of breath, and he was also rather nervous. To be allowed to deliver himself without let or hindrance, was not what he had expected. Being prepared for resentment, absolute passivity had disconcerted him strangely; and the end of his speech had been characterized with a conciliatory tone which had developed in spite of himself. He waited a moment, tremulously expectant, but no word or sign came from his wife, even to indicate that she had heard him. He went on persuasively and tentatively.

"The marriage in itself is hardly one which we need deplore," he said. "Indeed I may say that it is not destitute of advantages. Nor do I see that anything is gained by a quarrel on the subject. It will create one of those family breaches so much to be regretted, but it will hardly influence events. Pardon my reminding you, my dear, that you cannot prevent the marriage."

Again Dr. Vallotson stopped, and again his words were followed by a blank silence. Mrs. Vallotson's lips were compressed to a thin grey line, and the sombreness of her eyes seemed to shut in a sullen, unyielding defiance.

"So what do you think, my love?" continued Dr. Vallotson, with a comfortableness of tone which was not quite so certain or so genuine as it might have been. "Don't you think now that it would be as well to bury the past, and withdraw your opposition? If you were to run up to London and see them—that would be a very pleasant plan, it seems to me. A nice little change like that would do you good. You could, of course, make Lady Karslake understand, if you thought well, what were your first feelings on the subject. And then you might stay in town for the wedding. I dare say Connie would like to go with you."

For the first time since he had introduced the subject, Mrs. Vallotson turned to her husband ; turned with a sudden rough force that startled him.

"I dare say she would," she said, in a hoarse, abrupt voice. "But she will have to do without it ! You're talking nonsense, and I'm busy !"

"You will not go ?"

"No."

There was that in the monosyllable before which Dr. Vallotson's courage oozed away. He did not argue the point.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"I ASSURE you it is the greatest disappointment to hundreds of people that the wedding is not to be a little later in the year. If it had taken place in November, for instance, my dear Lady Karslake, it would have been quite the wedding of the year."

Mrs. Slade-Fenton finished her speech with a benignly patronizing smile ; and her hostess laughed slightly as she said,—

"I am afraid we must plead guilty to having taken our opportunity of set purpose !"

It was not Mrs. Slade-Fenton who replied. Miss Kenderdine's voice struck in with an acerbity but thinly veiled.

"That is what everybody concludes, of course," she said, with much affability of demeanour. "When a woman has been married once she is hardly likely to care to make a spectacle of herself a second time."

Lady Karslake was leaning languidly back in her chair, and she barely turned her head as she glanced round at the speaker. She was looking rather pale and tired. A month had gone by since the evening when she sat waiting for North Branston's return from Alnchester ; and it had left its traces on her face, as such a month has done on the face of many another sensitive woman. Only a fortnight remained now before the wedding day ; and the natural and inevitable preparations to be compressed into so short an engagement

had involved no small amount of physical as well as mental fatigue. That the engagement should be as short as might be had been almost tacitly agreed between herself and North. There was nothing to wait for. The emptiness of town was a great incentive to haste in Lady Karslake's eyes. North had taken a house immediately, and it was to be ready for them on their return from the honeymoon.

Mrs. Slade-Fenton and Miss Kenderdine had been out of town since very shortly after the announcement of North Branston's engagement ; but in the interval which had preceded her departure, the former lady had opened friendly relations with the future wife of her husband's partner, and the necessity for a cordial reception of these advances had dawned upon Lady Karslake as one of the trials of her new position. She liked Mrs. Slade-Fenton less on closer acquaintance, and for Miss Kenderdine she had a vehement distaste. She fully appreciated the exigencies of the situation, however, and comported herself accordingly ; but an unexpected call from the two ladies, who were passing through London, was a tax on her resources which she was by no means pleased to meet. She ignored Miss Kenderdine's observation with a touch of disdain, and turned to Mrs. Slade-Fenton.

"Are you in town for long ?" she said.

"Only for two days," was the answer. "A flying visit, really, but I was determined to find time to see you. We are going down to Hertfordshire, and we shall come up, of course, for the wedding, you know."

"It is very kind of you," murmured Lady Karslake politely.

She poured out a cup of tea which she made no attempt to drink.

"Oh, we would not be absent for the world," returned

Mrs. Slade-Fenton suavely. "Such an occasion, you know. You are frightfully busy, I suppose?"

"I suppose so," answered Lady Karlake, with a smile.

"You have to compress a good deal into a very short time," put in Miss Kenderdine, with unpleasant suggestion in her voice.

And this time Lady Karlake, turned and answered her.

"You would prefer a long engagement yourself?" she said sweetly. "We shall know what to expect of you, then. Let us hope that "he" will not be very impatient!"

She looked round as she spoke with a little amused smile still on her lips. The door was opening, apparently to admit another caller, and she did not catch the name announced by the servant. She rose easily and unconcernedly, and then stopped short, momentarily at a loss. To her surprise the figure which followed the unheard name into the room was not familiar to her. It was a tall, dark, grey-haired woman, dressed in a handsome black mantle of a fashion which differed very materially from that worn by Mrs. Slade-Fenton; a heavy black bonnet, and a dark green dress. She stopped as Lady Karlake hesitated and confronted her in silence.

What there was in the gaze of the sombre black eyes meeting hers that touched the chords of Lady Karlake's memory, she never knew. She only realized that quite suddenly she recollected. A wave of intense surprise swept over her, and she moved forward to receive her guest with a step and bearing that were at once singularly proud and impetuous.

"Mrs. Vallotson!" she exclaimed. "What a surprise! I had no idea you were in town!"

Mrs. Vallotson's face was singularly grey in its pallor, but it was absolutely passive and more entirely self-possessed than was the sensitive face of her hostess. She did not seem to see Lady Karslake's outstretched hand, however, as she said, in a level, monotonous voice,—

"I hardly expected to come. I came up yesterday."

"I am very pleased to see you," returned Lady Karslake a little haughtily. Then she moved and included her other guests in the conversation. "May I introduce you to Mrs. Slade-Fenton?" she said. "Mrs. Slade-Fenton, Mrs. Vallotson. Miss Kenderdine, Mrs. Vallotson." She paused a moment, and then added to Mrs. Slade-Fenton: "You have, of course, heard Dr. Branston speak of his sister?"

Mrs. Slade-Fenton and Miss Kenderdine had been intent and curious spectators, in spite of the studied indifference of their manner, of the unexpected arrival. With Lady Karslake's last words their interest received the stimulus of a direct point. Mrs. Slade-Fenton's knowledge of North Branston's relations had never gone beyond a vague and indifferent understanding that he had "people living at Alnchester," and the appearance of this stiff, dowdily-dressed woman awakened in her an idle curiosity.

"Of course," she said suavely, covertly surveying Mrs. Vallotson at the same time through her gold eye-glasses. "So glad to have the pleasure! Your brother and I are great friends, I assure you, Mrs. Vallotson."

Mrs. Vallotson had seated herself, erect and formal; and she had scrutinized the two elaborately-dressed figures, as Lady Karslake alluded to North Branston, with a gleam of almost sullen curiosity in her eyes. She made no attempt whatever to respond to Mrs. Slade-Fenton's overture.

"Indeed!" she said.

"You do not often leave Alnchester, I imagine," continued Mrs. Slade-Fenton, patronizingly, "as I have never had the pleasure of meeting you before. No doubt this interesting occasion brings you up?"

She glanced at Lady Karlake, as she spoke, with her blandest smile. And Lady Karlake, with an impulsive, almost unconscious movement, turned her head to listen for Mrs. Vallotson's answer. It came, after a pause, curt and abrupt.

"I am in town on business," said Mrs. Vallotson.

A sense of something strange about Mrs. Vallotson's arrival, which had impressed itself on her fellow-visitor developed into a sense of something distinctly piquant. Miss Kenderdine's lips parted into a spiteful smile as she told herself that Dr. Branston's impossible sister was not in town to add to Lady Karlake's felicity.

"You are combining business with pleasure, then," she said aloud, "for of course you will stay for your brother's wedding?"

Apparently Mrs. Vallotson did not catch the interrogative tone in which the words were spoken, for she made no reply either by word or sign. Lady Karlake was playing restlessly with a fold of her dress; she did not speak, and a dead silence ensued.

It was broken by Mrs. Slade-Fenton, who found herself obliged, in spite of her reluctance, to rise and take leave.

"So charmed to have met you!" she said to Mrs. Vallotson, as she shook hands. "It is 'au revoir,' of course, for we shall meet at the wedding. Good-bye!"

Numerous last words to Lady Karlake followed; questions as to trousseau; playful messages to North; during which Mrs. Vallotson sat immovable. And it was only when no further pretext for lingering was to be invented that Mrs. Slade-Fenton and Miss Kenderdine

finally went downstairs, leaving their hostess at liberty to shut the drawing-room door. Then with a spirited, sensitive set of her whole graceful figure, Lady Karslake crossed the room again with swift, nervous steps to where Mrs. Vallotson sat.

"Mrs. Vallotson," she said, in a low, impulsive voice, "I need not tell you that your visit is the greatest surprise to me. May I hope that it is to be a pleasant surprise?"

There was no answer. Mrs. Vallotson lifted her eyes and fixed them, as in deliberate scrutiny, on the mobile face that looked down upon her. Lady Karslake's eyes flashed a little. There had been a noticeable struggle in her words between a gracious and conciliatory intention and a hostile instinct; and the hostility developed as she continued,—

"It will hardly surprise you, I imagine, that I am prepared for an alternative. You will understand, of course, that your brother has told me something of what has passed between you."

The sombre eyes were watching her fixedly and mercilessly.

"What did he tell you?"

With a fierce little gesture of disdainful repudiation Lady Karslake turned away.

"I think we need not refer to the matter," she said.

Mrs. Vallotson did not press the point. Her eyes were still fastened on Lady Karslake; and a slight contraction of the lips, which should have been a smile, broke for an instant with an absolutely ghastly effect the immobility of her face.

It was Lady Karslake who broke the silence. She came swiftly up to Mrs. Vallotson's side.

"Surely," she said, and her voice had never been more winning, "surely we may forget all that is painful in the

past. You have not come here, I know, to renew a useless altercation. You have come to make friends with us."

She half stretched out one hand as she finished, but almost as though in spite of herself it fell at her side again. And as she stood waiting for an answer—her brows slightly contracted, her lips parted and tremulous—Mrs. Vallotson rose slowly. The slender figure before her was little shorter than her own powerful form, and they stood face to face.

"Why should you assume that it would be a useless altercation?"

The words came from Mrs. Vallotson in a low, grating tone, and as she heard them Lady Karlake lifted one hand in a gesture of supreme scorn. But the dark eyes seemed to hold hers, and she did not turn them away.

"What else can it be?" she said, and the defiance of her voice startled her. "Your brother is free to choose for himself. He has done so. No one has either right or power to stand between him and his choice."

She saw a strange and dreadful haze fall upon the eyes into which she was looking. A moment of silence, which held in it an unutterable horror, seemed to engulf her and turn her cold, and then she heard a step on the landing and a touch on the handle of the door.

On the instant she had torn herself away from Mrs. Vallotson's gaze, and as North Branston entered the room she was by his side, clinging with nervous, almost convulsive fingers to his arm.

"Your sister has come!" she cried, in an odd, uneven voice. "North, your sister."

North stopped short. Involuntarily and unconsciously his other hand closed over the trembling fingers that lay upon his arm.

"Adelaide!" he said.

"She has forgiven us," said Lady Karslake, with a little excited, half-scornful laugh. "Mrs. Vallotson, isn't that so?"

Like a woman walking in her sleep, with grey shadows standing out about her mouth, Mrs. Vallotson crossed the room and turned her cheek mechanically to North Branston.

"How do you do, North?" she said.

CHAPTER XXXII.

“WE seem to be at cross purposes this evening.”

The words were somewhat grimly uttered, and North Branston rose, as he spoke, and walked aimlessly across the room.

It was about three hours later. With a punctilious and formal courtesy North had accompanied Mrs. Vallotson to her hotel ; he had then returned to dine with Lady Karlake. The dinner itself had been a singularly silent function. A heavy oppression seemed to rest upon North, in spite of his half involuntary attempts to throw it off. Lady Karlake was absent and fitful in humour. By neither the one nor the other was Mrs. Vallotson's visit alluded to.

Lady Karlake had opened the conversation, when North appeared in the drawing-room, by a question with reference to a detail connected with the furnishing of their house, over which they were not entirely in accord. There was a petulance in her voice eloquent of that irritability of nerves to which a subject susceptible of contradictory discussion appeals ; and North, as though his own nerves were somewhat overstrung, had entered uncompromisingly into the subject. Her wilfulness had developed into unreasonableness before his unyielding conciseness of argument, and his speech as to cross purposes was the not unnatural resource of a man for whom further argument has been rendered hopelessly impossible.

The words were followed by a silence. Lady Karslake lay back in her chair, one hand thrown over her head, with the fingers tightly clenched. Quite suddenly she pulled herself up and rested her chin on her hand, as she supported her elbow on her knee.

"North," she said impulsively, and in rather a low voice, "will your sister stay in town for long?"

The instant the question passed her lips North turned to her, his face darkening. He crossed the room slowly to where she sat.

"I do not know," he said.

No tone of conciliation had come from either, the little breach between them was left untouched and ignored; but in the moment's interval that followed an effect of unity was produced. It was as though the sense of jar and strain existing in each, and previously in half unconscious opposition, had tacitly coalesced.

"Have you any notion why she came?"

"No!" He added slowly, and as if speaking rather to himself than to her: "Dr. Vallotson wished it. I heard from him a week ago."

"Perhaps he persuaded her?"

North shook his head grimly.

"He has no influence whatever," he answered.

Lady Karslake moved restlessly.

"I hope she will not stay!" she said, and there was a catch in her breath. "North, why did she come?"—with a nervous, insistent emphasis on the question.

"Has she changed her mind?"

"I suppose so."

She glanced up at his face as he spoke the three words. A rush of faint colour tinged her cheeks, dying instantly away to leave her very pale.

"But you don't think so!" she cried. "North, what do you think? She—she means kindly, I suppose?"

"She has never meant kindly by me yet!" said North, and the words seemed to come from between his set teeth against his will.

With a gesture, half of repulsion, half of defiance, Lady Karslake sprang from her chair, and moved restlessly away. She spoke with a sudden wayward irritation.

"I don't understand you, North!" she said. "You let the thought of your sister weigh upon you in a perfectly preposterous way. If there are old scores between you that you cannot forget, you need not make a tragedy of them. I don't like it!"

As though with the utterance of his last words that strange reserve which hedged North Branston round where Mrs. Vallotson was concerned had received some kind of indefinable shock, the preoccupation which possessed him seemed to fall away, leaving him at his hardest and most cynical. He made a slight gesture of acquiescence. Lady Karslake stopped abruptly in her rapid, aimless movements and confronted him.

"Why did you not show me Dr. Vallotson's letter—or at least tell me of it?" she demanded imperiously.

"I did not think of it," said North drily.

"You did not think of me, you mean," was the impetuous retort. "You did not care to tell me! It was not that you were indifferent to anything that concerned your relations with your sister. Do you imagine that I don't see the effect her coming has had on you? Do you imagine that you are like yourself this evening?"

"Perhaps we are neither of us quite like ourselves this evening!" retorted North grimly. "Let us hope, as you say, that Adelaide's stay in town will be a short one."

Lady Karslake laughed captiously.

"Oh, I am quite indifferent on the subject!" she said. "Why should I—" She stopped, the colour comin-

and going in her cheeks. "I suppose you think I'm jealous!" she cried. "Well, perhaps I am. Why should you think so much of any woman's hostility as you do of your sister's? Why—?" She stopped again, the fire of jealousy, which she seemed to fan of deliberate impulse, died down as suddenly as it had sprung up, and she went swiftly to him and clasped her hands tightly upon his arm.

"Oh, North!" she said in a low, uneven voice, "I hope she won't stay long—not for the tenth!"

North laughed recklessly, almost savagely.

"What does it matter?" he said.

Day after day rose and faded, bringing gradually nearer and nearer the day of the wedding, and day after day saw Lady Karlake's hopes as to Mrs. Vallotson's speedy departure still unfulfilled. Mrs. Vallotson never alluded to the wedding; she never alluded to Alnchester, or the prospect, near or distant, of her return thither. Neither did she ever speak, either to North Branston or to Lady Karlake, of any business in town or of any interests or occupation which filled her time when she was not with them. And this latter reticence on her part, isolating her as it did from any life other than their own, tended to give her solitary figure an altogether disproportionate position in their daily scheme of things. A sense of tacit compulsion pressed upon Lady Karlake; and, under its influence, hardly a day passed some hours of which were not spent by the two women together, either alone or with North. At Lady Karlake's invitation, Mrs. Vallotson lunched and dined in Wilton Street; at Lady Karlake's invitation she accompanied her on more than one visit to the dressmaker who was preparing the trousseau; and much of the shopping inevitable to that last fortnight was accomplished in her society, but wholly without comment on her part.

Day after day went by and Mrs. Vallotson's demeanour never varied. All the vigorous self-assertion, all the imperiousness of her old manner at Alnchester seemed to have grown into an indescribable aloofness, which placed an immeasurable and icy distance between herself and the two whose society she yet seemed tacitly to court. She might be with them ; but physical contiguity seemed to accentuate into something at times inexpressibly oppressive the barrier that lay between them. Again and again, hearing her dull, measured tones, Lady Karlake would turn restlessly and almost incoherently from the subject in hand. Again and again, lifting her eyes to meet the covert intentness of the black ones fixed, now on herself, now on North, she would rise impulsively and break up the group. After that first evening North Branston and Lady Karlake never spoke together of Mrs. Vallotson. They had, as it seemed, more than enough to occupy their time and thoughts in the incessant difficulties with which their preparations, mutual and individual, had become suddenly rife. During that last fortnight nothing prospered with them. Arrangements fell through, or proved unsatisfactory. They were all more or less trivial difficulties, but, concentrated thus into so short a space of time, worrying to the last degree.

Nor was it on such outward circumstances only that an adverse spell seemed to rest. The relations between North and Lady Karlake during the month which had followed his return from Alnchester had been of a somewhat agitating and tumultuous character. Given a woman nervous, sensitive, and impetuous ; and a man with so strangely warped a character as North's ; linked together by a love self-centred and unilluminating, differing in conception on either side as the love of a man and woman must inevitably differ, and harmonized

only by a central depth and reality unrealized by either, and no other result is possible. But during those four weeks the sense of strain and fret had been a background merely, an undertone in the full chord of love. With the discord which had jarred between them on the evening after Mrs. Vallotson's unexpected appearance, however, a new era seemed to be inaugurated. Their differences during that fortnight were to be numbered by their meetings. Every difficulty as it arose was the subject of a discussion more or less petulant on Lady Karlake's part, more or less cynical and uncompromising on North's part. With every day the tension obviously increased. With every day, as Mrs. Vallotson came and went, cold and immovable, Lady Karlake's irritability developed. With every day North's bitterness of manner became confirmed.

That fortnight told on Lady Karlake's physique as the previous month of her engagement had not begun to do. She grew thin and fragile-looking; her eyes grew larger and brighter; and she lost all colour.

Her appearance was commented upon by more than one of her guests when, on the night before the wedding day, Lady Karlake gave her last dinner-party. The ninth of September had come; Mrs. Vallotson was still in town. The Slade-Fentons were there and Miss Kenderdine—Mrs. Slade-Fenton demonstratively friendly to North and to Lady Karlake, elaborately patronizing to Mrs. Vallotson. There were some of Lady Karlake's relations, not enthusiastic but eminently amiable; and there was Archdeacon French, quiet, cordial, and rather intently observant, as the evening wore on, both of his hostess and of North Branston. For the evening was not a success. Whether the shadow that gradually filled the pretty room really emanated from the sombre woman's presence, which seemed to Lady Karlake's

over-wrought imagination the very centre on which the function turned ; whether it emanated from North Branston, who seemed to be fighting an inexplicable depression with his grimmest front ; or whether its source was the hostess herself, growing whiter, more silent, and more absent-minded as the time wore on ; it would have been difficult to say. But by ten o'clock it was being confidentially murmured among the guests that Lady Karslake was worn out, and that it would be only kind to stand between her and rest for as short a time as possible. And by half-past ten nearly everyone had gone. Mrs. Vallotson and the Slade-Fentons' party—which included Archdeacon French—were the last to take leave ; and Lady Karslake passed from Mrs. Vallotson's cold touch of the hand to Mrs. Slade-Fenton's effusive auguries for the morrow, with her lips a little compressed. The last to wish her good night was Archdeacon French. He took the hand she held out to him and looked at her keenly and gently.

" Good night, Lady Karslake," he said. " You will rest when to-morrow is over ! "

She smiled at him faintly, and then, as he left the room, she let her forehead fall gently on her hand as it rested on the mantelpiece. For the moment she was alone ; North had gone to the door with the last departures, and she stood quite motionless, the lace on her dress moving softly as though she trembled. The front door closed ; North's step came slowly up the stairs ; and, as he entered the room, she lifted her head.

North paused in the doorway, and looked at her uncertainly. He was very pale.

" May I stay for a few minutes ? " he said hesitatingly.

" Yes ! "

He came in and stood on the opposite side of the fireplace, looking at her heavily. For nearly a moment

neither spoke. Then with a swift impetuous movement she stretched out both her hands to him, and he caught them desperately in his own.

"North," she said hurriedly, "North, what have we been doing for the last fortnight? Why have we made one another so wretched?"

The grip in which he held her hands must have been painful at any other time, but now she was unconscious of any physical sensation. Her eyes shone with a light that was half beseeching, half self-surrender.

He watched her for a moment, and his face twitched painfully.

"Have I made you wretched?" he said.

"I have made myself wretched! We have made one another wretched!" was the quick answer. "Ah, North, how can we? I've been thinking of it all the evening—I've thought of it often when I've been most detestable! How can we! Look, dearest"—her rapid speech trembled with a growing tenderness—"to-night let us put it all away. All that we've quarrelled over, all that has fretted us! We love each other, and love goes deeper than we can understand—means more than we can realize! Let us make our stand on that!"

"We love each other!" he said hoarsely. He was holding her hands crushed against his breast, looking into her eyes as though they held his very life. "Eve, do you know what you mean when you say that? Do you know what a brute I am—how hard and ungenerous I can be? Do you know that I'm scarred, that there are marks in my life that can never—"

She drew one hand swiftly away and placed it on his lips, but if she turned a little paler, the only change that came to her eyes was a deepening of their light.

"Hush!" she said softly, "that's put away. Your life is mine to-morrow; your scars are mine. Ah, if we

come to questions, it is I who should say, can you love me now that you see me as I am, wilful, unreasonable, capricious? Ah, North, can you?"

"Don't you know?"

She paused a moment, meeting his eyes, the necklace at her throat rising and falling rapidly.

"Yes," she said, a sweetness new to it in her voice. "I know! I know that all our lives, with each their pains and disappointments, have been worth living because they led to this! I know that from to-morrow this is our whole existence. I know that having this we have what nothing can take from us, nothing destroy, and through which nothing can touch us. North, are you happy?"

Still with his eyes on hers, and with the bitter lines in his face merging into something infinitely stronger and finer, he drew her slowly into his arms, and their lips met in a long kiss.

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CHAPTER XXXIII.

A LITTLE later North Branston had left the house, and was walking swiftly along the street towards his rooms. It was a lovely night. The air was soft but not oppressive, and from a cloudless sky the full moon shed a radiance beneath which streets and houses, without a beauty of their own, lay transfigured. North Branston's face was very still ; his eyes were deep and glowing, and the light within touched his every feature into a peace such as had never rested on them before. He walked straight on, glancing neither to the right nor to the left, taking the right road mechanically and by instinct. The touch of Eve Karslake's hand was still upon him ; her kiss still lingered on his lips ; and in the realization and satisfaction which that kiss had brought him, all his other senses—all cynicism, all bitterness, all weariness—were, for the moment, lulled to rest.

He reached the house in which he lived, and let himself in with his latch-key. As he went upstairs he noticed with a vague surprise that the door of his room was half open, and that there was a bright light within. He pushed the door open and went in, glancing about him involuntarily as he did so. And then he stopped suddenly short. Seated by the table, and facing the door, was Mrs. Vallotson.

For the instant, as his eyes rested on her, a flash of astonishment—the simple surprise created by her unexpected presence—touched North Branston's features,

It passed, superseded by a darkening and settling of his whole face ; an instinctive blotting out of the unlikely and unlooked-for in her appearance, even at such an hour, before that inalienable sense of antagonism and defiance which seemed in this all dominating assertion of itself to assert, also, its existence as the supreme factor in his being.

" This is an unexpected pleasure, Adelaide ! " he said slowly. " To what do I owe it ? "

Mrs. Vallotson was dressed, as she had been when she left Lady Karslake's house an hour before, in a long black velvet mantle. She had no covering on her head, and her face, framed in her grey hair and set off by the sombre black which fell from her throat to her feet, looked almost ashen in its pallor. It was singularly noticeable that her colourlessness in no way tended to the refinement of her face. Still, as it was on the surface, there seemed to be some kind of tense emotion stirring underneath, innately coarse in its suggestion. Her eyes glittered slightly with that singular and almost reckless excitement which is sometimes induced by the long-continued defiance and inexorable suppression of acute agony. She followed North with her eyes as he crossed the room, but she made no other movement.

" The wedding is not put off, I suppose ? " She spoke with an abrupt assumption of carelessness most uncharacteristic of her, and her voice jarred a little.

" No ! " he said grimly. " Why should it be put off ? "

There was no reply. Mrs. Vallotson hardly seemed to have heard the question, and her eyes had wandered from North Branston's face and were fixed on the wall behind him. As though affected by the silence in spite of himself, an added hardness settled about North Branston's mouth,

"I don't imagine that you have come here, at this time of night, to ask me that question, Adelaide," he said harshly. "If you'll tell me what you have come for I shall be glad. I've a good deal to do!"

With a feverish movement Mrs. Vallotson rose from her chair.

"Come for?" she said in an odd, uneven voice. "What should I have come for?"

"That is precisely what I should be glad to know!"

She looked at him for a moment, the excitement beating behind the rigid quiet of her features, giving her face an indescribably painful effect. Then she turned violently away.

"For nothing, of course!" she said. "Nothing! To wish you well, I suppose. To—congratulate you."

The words themselves were nothing. But the tone in which they were uttered—high pitched, rasping, ringing, above all with an unconscious and irrepressible sneer—seemed to penetrate North Branston's sensibility instantaneously and to the quick. She had turned towards the door as she finished, with a rough, instinctive movement; but before she had gone two paces North Branston stood in her path, his face set and livid with suppressed passion, his lips white, a supreme intensity of questioning about his whole person.

"Adelaide," he said thickly and rapidly, "explain yourself. You've come here to-night for some purpose. What is it? To-morrow I begin my life again, and leave the past behind me. If there is any explanation of all that has come and gone between us, of which I do not know, tell it me to-night. If there is any reason, so far concealed from me, against my marriage, let me know it now!"

They were close together. The two dark faces were almost on a level. He saw a ghastly spasm or convulsion

pass across her features, he saw something rise in her eyes unfathomable and terrible to meet, and then he saw her face set like a marble mask against his own. As though it came from a long way off he heard her voice, thin and distant.

"There is nothing concealed from you! There is nothing to be explained!"

A moment later, without haste and with a rigid self-possession which was full of dignity, she had passed him, as he mechanically made way for her, and reached the door. On the threshold she turned.

"Shall I find a cab?" she asked.

"I will come down with you!" he replied mechanically.

She passed directly out of the room and down the stairs, he following her. He put her into a passing vehicle and saw it lumber away, no other word having been spoken on either side.

When North re-entered his room alone, hardly ten minutes had passed since he entered it for the first time that night. The strange interview which had awaited him then had occupied but a brief space as seconds and minutes go. But in that brief space his mental condition had been totally altered. The calm in which he had been wrapped had been displaced by an intensity of excitement, created he hardly knew how or to what purpose.

He shut the door of his room, and looked about him with a sombre defiance lurking amid the stir of his expression. An indefinable shadow seemed to fill the room for him; something ominous and foreboding seemed to brood upon it. He crossed the room with a quick stride, and, sitting down at his writing-table, addressed himself to the work that was waiting for him. He had a few letters to write; and then he came

to the real business before him—the sorting of his papers.

He worked on steadily, endorsing, destroying, putting by ; and as the time passed on the concentration which he brought to his task acquired a dogged character. His lips grew compressed ; his eyes never stirred beyond his hand.

All that was hardest, least sensitive, and most practical in North Branston was fighting instinctively and deliberately ; fighting something within himself which he could hardly have defined, even if he had chosen to do so ; fighting that strange excitement that possessed him as with a vague sense of crisis. His blood was tingling in his veins ; his nerves, strung by his scene with Lady Karlake into a beatitude such as he had never known ; and since so jarred and grated by Mrs. Vallotson's unexpected appearance, were in a state of acute sensibility. And all his instinct was arrayed against that same sensibility ; arrayed to clutch at the commonplace and to repudiate the influence that held him.

His work came to an end at last. He rose and began to pace up and down the room as he lighted a cigar. He was intent, as he thought, on the process. He would smoke one cigar only, he told himself, before he went to bed. And then, unrealized and unrestrained, his thoughts slipped quietly out of his control.

How far they had gone back ! He was thinking of his childhood. He was seeing himself again as that little taciturn boy of whom Alnchester had disapproved ; but he had no thought of Alnchester in the matter. He was remembering that little child as he had not remembered him for years. He was recalling, with that strange mixture of memory and mature comprehension which makes so vivid a picture, the waking of the childish perceptions

to a sense that somehow or other little North Branston was not like other children, that his world was not their world, nor his life as their lives. He was recalling the sense—half-rebellious and half-sullen—of loneliness and injustice which had made the tragedy of his childhood. And he saw himself, through the mist of years, one of two figures only that stood out sharp and distinct in a common isolation against the shadowy phantasmagoria of his memory—a child and a woman.

His cigar went out between his fingers unnoticed, and he paced up and down. The law which connected the disillusionment of his childhood in his mind with that other and deeper disillusionment which had come to him later in life, might be subtle and far to seek. He did not seek it. He only saw himself again as a young man with aspirations, thoughts, affinities running deep and soaring high. He saw himself alone ; shut in upon himself, without a friend, without a guide ; forced into contact with that which developed all that was worst in him, the evil genius of his life. He saw his faiths wither and shrivel up in his hands ; he saw his spiritual perceptions fail and run dry ; he saw his scheme of life shrink and grow narrow until it could hold nothing intangible, nothing beyond this world. He saw himself drifting deliberately into pessimism ; he saw himself become that bitterest of all cynics—the cynic whose cynicism is an armour against despair.

A long unconscious sigh roused him from his strangely vivid musings. He came back suddenly to the present ; the young man and the child receded into the distance, and he of whom they had held the germ, the North Branston of the present day and hour, stood face to face with the future.

He sat down abruptly, propping his chin on his clenched hands, and looking straight before him. The

clock on the mantelpiece struck two, but he did not hear it. His heart was beating slowly and heavily ; the sense of crisis, no longer resisted, was shaking him through and through. The sense of something ominous and foreboding in the very atmosphere of his room, and brought to it by Mrs. Vallotson's presence, seemed to rise suddenly and close round him until it became part of himself.

The future ! The future, to-night, meant for him the morrow. Try as he would, beat against the intangible barrier as he might and did, he could get no further. All that mistily shining stretch of years to come which had unrolled itself before him on the night when he first realized that the solitude of his life was to be shared at last, on the night when the impulse towards reconciliation with Mrs. Vallotson had risen in him, was blotted out. The morrow, vague and shadowy, weighted with a strange and utterly inexplicable darkness, loomed up before him, shutting out all that was to lie beyond. And the centre figure of the future—let him repudiate the fact as he would—was the centre figure of the past ; the isolation of the past was the isolation of the future. The influence of the woman he loved, the influence which only an hour before had thrilled him through and through, seemed to have been swept back into a region whither he could not follow it, driven forth by an indomitable power. He stood alone, conscious of his loneliness ; conscious of his loss ; resisting with every fibre, as a man wrestles with overwhelming physical odds. Out of the blackness which he strove to penetrate, strove to deny, one presence only confronted him—the presence of Mrs. Vallotson.

That there are influences about us other and more powerful than the tangible influences which we understand—influences against which, under certain circumstances, strength of nerve and brain is no slightest protection—is a theory which is at least unwise wholly to

deny. The September night wore on, the September dawn—the dawn of that morrow on which his thoughts were fixed—crept slowly into the sky, and still North Branston sat there by his table dominated and possessed by an influence which had no name, which took no tangible form. He had contested the ground inch by inch ; he had denied it and defied it. And as the sunshine stole into the room he sat there still, grim and haggard, its helpless prey.

What was it ? He had asked himself the question many times during the night. During the morning, as he went about his final preparations with his face set and stern, he asked himself the question again and again. Was it a dull sense of foreboding ? Was it the very acme of intense undefined anticipation ? And instead of any answer from his reason, before his mental vision there would come the face of Mrs. Vallotson, dark, set, and antagonistic, as though the answer were to be found there.

The day grew gradually older. With every hour struck out by the clock the extraordinary tension on his nerves seemed to tighten, as every hour seemed to bring nearer that undefined crisis. He received the friend who was to be his best man, and sat down to luncheon with him like a man in a dream. Presently he was aware that they were walking together through the streets. He heard his friend ask him something about a ring. He put his hand into his pocket mechanically, drew out a little gold circlet, and looked at it curiously. It seemed to have nothing to do with him ; to be utterly incongruous with the shadow in which he was living and moving. Then they stopped. A heavy door swung back before him, and he passed out of the September sunshine and the noise and bustle of the streets into the silent half light of a London church.

It was a large church belonging to that heavy and depressing school of architecture which obtained some fifty years ago. It was not half full, and the handful of smart people present seemed, in spite of the festivity of the occasion, to be entirely insufficient to dissipate the gloom of the edifice. The usual whispering chatter was going on, but it had a subdued sound. It ceased suddenly as North Branston walked up the aisle ; and the dead silence against which his footsteps rang, struck him with a chill which seemed at once to meet and focus the deadly sense of cold that was lying at his heart. All his senses were acutely, preternaturally, alive ; all his perceptions were concentrated to one end ; the discovery of the material position of the presence with which his every thought was weighted. Was Mrs. Vallotson there ?

He walked up to the altar steps, and then he turned and deliberately scanned the faces ranged in the pews before him ; scanned them regardless of smiles and little nods, even of beckonings, from the front pews ; and scanned them in vain. Mrs. Vallotson was not in the church.

A long breath parted his lips ; a breath partly of relief, partly of that strained anticipation which comes from the persistent veiling of a sword the existence of which is not to be denied. He stepped forward in response to a loudly whispered adjuration from Mrs. Slade-Fenton, who occupied a prominent position, and then, becoming aware that an invitation was being tendered to him to go and speak to Archdeacon French in the vestry, he followed his guide in the same automatic fashion. He must have heard Archdeacon French's kindly words, for he heard his own voice responding in what seemed to be suitable fashion. But the first thing of which he was really conscious was the hurried advent of a verger, with the words :

"The lady's coming, sir ! "

Without a word, with a leap of the heart before which all the shadows that surrounded him seemed to flee away, North Branston turned and went out into the church to meet his wife. And as he passed out of the vestry door his gaze fell on the face of Mrs. Vallotson as she sat in the front pew.

His best man saw his lips turn white and took him by the arm to turn him to his place before the altar steps. But North shook off his touch. With his whole figure braced, with every line of his face set into the supreme defiance of an iron resolution, he strode to where Archdeacon French was waiting, and stood there, with his back turned to the church, immovable. He heard the soft rustle of women's dresses coming up the aisle behind him ; he felt that the woman he loved stood by his side ; but he did not look towards her. Even then, at the very altar, at the very crisis of his repudiation and defiance of her presence, he was alone with the woman who had haunted him through the night ; who sat behind now with her black eyes glazed and dead, staring straight into space.

"Dearly beloved."

The congregation rose, and the woman who was sitting next to Mrs. Vallotson, a relation of Lady Karslake, glanced at her neighbour with an involuntary fascination ; there was something indescribably strange about the movements with which the tall, solitary woman rose, and stood gripping the front of the pew.

The address rolled through the church. It ended, and the customary pause ensued. A strange sensation of cold crept over the woman whose eyes had been riveted throughout on Mrs. Vallotson's clenched hands. Those hands seemed to have grown rigid. The figure to which they belonged seemed to have taken on the immobility of a corpse. Was her terrible neighbour going to faint ?

she wondered. The pause was over. Archdeacon French turned to the pair before him and, in a low and solemn voice, began that charge than which the liturgy holds nothing more solemn and impressive.

"I require and charge you both as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgment, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you know any impediment why ye may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, ye do now confess it. For be ye well assured that so many as are coupled together otherwise than as God's Word doth allow are not joined together by God, neither is their matrimony lawful."

The woman next Mrs. Vallotson felt a stir in the seat beside her, and saw those rigid fingers unlock themselves and spread themselves out wildly. Turning instinctively to catch her if she should fall, she saw what all the congregation saw.

Mrs. Vallotson had left her place. A strange, dead silence filled the church. Lady Karslake was taking off her gloves, and the attention of the little bridal party was concentrated on her movements, as Archdeacon French waited for her. The gaze of every other soul there present was fixed in a kind of spellbound fascination on the woman's figure unknown to almost everyone there, drawing nearer and nearer, stumbling and swaying blindly, to the unconscious couple before the altar steps. Mrs. Vallotson uttered no sound. She seemed to be unconscious of spectators. Still in the same dreadful silence, she reached the bridal party, and pushed between the two who stood there side by side, thrusting them asunder. She turned her terrible white face to North, and then a hoarse thick whisper came from her grey lips,—

"Stop!" she said. "It—must not—be!"

The voice died away. Something seemed to rattle in her throat, and she fell heavily between them on the ground.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"HAVE you seen him?"

"For a moment only. He told me he would rather be alone."

The question and answer, low-toned and brief, passed on the pavement outside the house in which North Branston lived. The questioner, Archdeacon French, had come up to the steps just as the young doctor who had been North's best man came out at the door, and had accosted him with that singular directness which only a common concern creates. It was seven o'clock in the evening; the evening of the tenth of September; the evening, as it seemed to these two men, of one of the longest days they had ever known. Five hours had passed since the wedding party had broken up; and even after five hours no very clear conception as to the sequence of events, as they had followed immediately upon Mrs. Vallotson's loss of consciousness, was possible to those upon whom had fallen the task of quelling the excitement and confusion that had ensued. That Lady Karslake had left the church at once; had left it on a brief word from North Branston as he held her hands for one instant in his own, was all of which Archdeacon French himself was certain, until the moment when a deep quiet had fallen upon the empty church, and he stood at the door of the vestry where the still unconscious woman lay.

Mrs. Vallotson had been taken to her hotel, attended by the young doctor whose services to North on that day should have been of so different a nature. Archdeacon French and North had waited there, in a silence which the former could not break, until word was brought them that consciousness had returned. And then North, putting aside the words the other tried to speak with a stiff movement of his hand, and something in his eyes that seemed to plead for toleration, left the house alone, without a word.

A pause followed the answer to Archdeacon French's question ; a pause, eloquent on the part of both men, of strongly moved feeling. Then the Archdeacon said, "How is Mrs. Vallotson ? "

The young doctor's tone and manner were rather constrained as he answered.

"Such an attack as hers," he said, "would have prostrated most women. But Mrs. Vallotson is a lady of extraordinary force. She is practically recovered."

"Have you just come from her ? "

The younger man bent his head.

"Yes," he said in a low voice. "There is no necessity for my seeing her again, and I thought that Branston would wish to know."

"Did she send him any word ? " asked Archdeacon French in the same low tone.

"No ! " The young man hesitated for a moment, and then added hurriedly, "but he knows that she is well enough to see him."

There was another eloquent pause, and this time the silence was broken by the younger man.

"Are you going up, sir ? " he asked.

Archdeacon French brought back his troubled, kindly gaze from the far distance on which it was fixed, and looked at his companion.

"No," he said quietly, "not now, he is best alone until it is over."

As if by common consent, and without another word, the two men turned and walked slowly away down the street.

Half an hour passed, the evening shadows were beginning to fall, and a soft breeze had sprung up. The street, a quiet one at all times, was quite empty when the door of the house opened and North Branston came out. The face was absolutely without colour, and it was very quiet; quiet with that terrible quiescence which tells of tension which has passed beyond the relief of any outward manifestation. His deep-set eyes had sunk a little in his head, but they were steady and almost dull. He walked down the street with a regular mechanical stride, and turned into the road leading to the hotel in which Mrs. Vallotson was stopping.

It was about a quarter of an hour's walk. His pace never varied, neither did his expression alter in the least. Having arrived, he sent up his name to Mrs. Vallotson's private sitting-room, waited quietly until his messenger returned, and then followed him upstairs.

It was the ordinary hotel sitting-room, a little shabbier and more uninteresting than usual perhaps, and rather untidy; partly, as it seemed, by reason of rough and continual pacing to and fro, which had displaced the furniture, and partly by reason of certain traces of Mrs. Vallotson's indisposition—a medicine bottle and wine-glass on the table, a shawl flung down on a chair, a heap of tumbled pillows, and so forth. It was furnished with a round table, a sideboard and a chiffonier, a suite of chairs, and a sofa. The sofa was so placed against the wall that it faced the door. And on the sofa, directly confronting North as he entered, supporting herself heavily with one hand on the seat, as though she had

sat down suddenly and involuntarily, was Mrs. Vallotson.

The waiter who had announced North withdrew, shutting the door noiselessly behind him. For a long moment not the slightest sound broke the dead silence of the room.

But that Mrs. Vallotson's stillness was temporary and abnormal, the result of some momentary and inexplicable fascination, was obvious in every line of her figure. The change that had come upon her in the course of the past few hours was extraordinary, first of all by reason of the impassable gulf which it fixed between the immovable, impassive woman of the past few weeks, the strongly controlled woman of all the years that were gone, and the woman of the present. It was as though in the interval of unconsciousness all the barriers of her nature—barriers alike instinctive and deliberate—which had held down and held back the real bent of the woman, had been obliterated once and for all, leaving free and unrestrained all the violent and unrefined passion that lay behind. Her face seemed to have grown coarser; the strong set of the mouth, relaxed and weakened, no longer held in abeyance those subtle suggestions of something blunt and unrefined within. Her whole expression was one of rage and hatred, half sullen, half reckless, alike impotent and defiant. Her hair, put up, as it seemed, by hands that trembled, was loose and disordered. Her dress, unfastened at the throat as though the swelling muscles would bear no pressure, had a dishevelled air. Her whole appearance as she sat there, staring at North with hot, bloodshot eyes, was inexpressively wild and terrible.

It was Mrs. Vallotson who broke the silence. She seemed to wrench her hold from the sofa as she rose, with aimless violence, to her feet.

"You've come!" she said hoarsely. "I wondered how soon!"

North Branston had not moved. As he met the passion of vindictive hatred in her face his own had grown a little stiller; but that was all. Of the bitterness and the antagonism, which the presence of the woman before him had never hitherto failed to create in him, his expression held now not a trace. It was as though these feelings, touching the extreme point of their development, had merged into something greater and higher than themselves, something before the tragedy of which all else faded and disappeared. The chain was drawing tighter and tighter, even to the last link, and the same supreme agony of that inexorable pressure that had laid bare the coarsest and most rebellious depths of the woman's spirit had brought to the man the strength of a great calm.

"Yes," he said in a low, steady tone, "I have come."

"What a fool!" she muttered. "What a fool! What a fool, I've been! After all these days, after all these weeks, to lose my head! To fail at the very last! Oh, what a fool!"

The words were not addressed to North. She seemed for the moment almost to have forgotten his presence. And there was something so horrible about the intensity of the self-vituperation, thus oblivious of everything but itself, that it was little wonder that the man who heard her took two steps forward as he spoke, as though with a blind instinct towards breaking up the situation.

"Do not let us protract this!" he said. "You know what I am here for. You know to what I have a right. Give it me!"

She turned upon him with an inarticulate ejaculation, clutching involuntarily at the back of a chair, her breath coming thick and fast as though it would choke her.

"Your right!" she cried. "Yes, you must have your right at last. Your right! What is it, do you think? A lifelong curse; a lifelong shame! A curse which, if I had my will, should kill you where you stand! A shame which I have held off all these years, only that you may drag it down on me at last. You've been the bane of my existence from the first! I might have known that this would come through you!"

Motionless as a rock North stood confronting her; the muscles of his face had contracted slightly. As though holding to that one rope in the midst of a sea of hideous confusion, he repeated his words,—

"Give me what I am here for."

She hardly seemed to hear his words. As though he had not spoken she went on, her voice growing in coarse fury with every syllable.

"If I could go back again!" she cried. She was beating her hand wildly against the bar of the chair. "If I could go back! The guilt would have been yours, not mine. I did my part when I forbade the marriage. On you—you who defied me, who trampled under your feet the claims of gratitude and duty, on you Heaven's vengeance would have fallen, not on me! Why did I interfere! Why did I interfere?"

"It's done!" he said hoarsely. "The truth must follow. Tell it me!"

She faced him for one moment; her eyes glaring, her features working convulsively. Then she broke into a wild laugh.

"Take it, then!" she cried, "if you're so anxious for it. Here it is. The woman you were going to make your wife is the widow of your father!"

"What!"

The cry broke from North Branston, as a man may cry once stabbed through and through. Then there was

a silence. Slowly and gropingly, with a face which was rapidly changing from white to grey, he stretched out his hand and felt for a chair. He sat down heavily, leaning forward, one clenched hand pressed down on the table.

"Say that again!" The words came from North Branston thick, hardly audible, and with long intervals between each. He did not lift his head.

As though in launching at him the bolt which had stunned him, her fury, thus relieved, had sunk down, leaving her to a ghastly realization of the irretrievableness of the situation, the woman on the other side of the table was watching him, with the defiant challenge in her distorted face giving place to a furtive, sullen stare.

Supporting herself by the grip with which she clutched the chair-rail in her hand, Mrs. Vallotson answered hoarsely,—

"Sir William Karslake was your father. You were an illegitimate child."

With a sudden desperate ejaculation, as though the point pressed home had quickened where it should have killed, North Branston threw up his head, and brought his clenched fist down on the table. His face was ashen and drawn, but every line of it was instinct with that which was flashing in his eyes—absolute negation and denial.

"It's false!" he cried. "It's false! Sir William Karslake had spent his life in India. It is not possible. How could a man live to my age in ignorance of such a curse upon his life? How—"

The words froze on his lips; the passion of expression turned to stone upon his face. Looking into the eyes of the woman before him, he looked back down the years of his life, and he saw there, rolling up from the farthest limits of his memory, a shapeless shadow which would

not be denied ; which seemed to take upon itself, even as he looked, the outline of a ghastly form which it had never worn before.

"Sir William Karslake went to India the year after you were born."

The words were uttered in a voice like that of an automaton, and the speaker's dreadful eyes never shifted from his face. With a last wild effort to release himself, with a final instinct to fight down that shadow, to beat it off, to crush it into nothingness at any cost, North Branston sprang to his feet with a hoarse cry.

"It's a lie!" he said. "Prove it! Give me your authority! Tell me how you know!"

The fierce demand, hurled out so desperately, rose and filled the room, and dropped upon a dead silence. A livid shade, not like the hue of life at all, was stealing over Mrs. Vallotson's face. She was leaning heavily forward on the chair by which she held, her breath coming in great laboured gasps. She tried to speak, but only a faint rattling in her throat made itself audible.

"Can't you understand?"

The words reached his ears thick and indistinct, and, as he heard them, something in her eyes seemed to leap up and burn into his brain. Once more, slowly, and for the last time, the look painted on her face was reflected back upon the face of the man with whom she was confronted. The muscles on North Branston's forehead were standing out tense and strained. His features seemed to freeze gradually into a horror unimaginable, inconceivable. He fell back a pace, and stood there staring at her.

"Say it!"

Hardly audible as the two words were, they carried with them the force of a command. And slowly, as though the words were dragged from her by an agency

against which she was powerless, Mrs. Vallotson answered them.

"Sir William Karslake's son is also mine."

The last links of the chain were drawn together. The man and woman bound by it stood face to face in an awful silence—mother and son.

Seconds passed into moments; moments drifted into the black gulf of the past; and not the slightest movement broke the deathlike stillness of the room. The man was the first to stir. With one of those commonplace every-day actions which show that tension too highly strained has snapped, that the mind pushed too far has relapsed into dull inaction, North sat down and rested his forehead on his hand as his elbow propped itself upon the table. As though his movement had broken a spell, the dreadful rigidity of Mrs. Vallotson's figure broke up in the same instant. Beating her hands passionately together, she turned upon him where he sat, no colour coming back into her face, her eyes glaring out of it in what seemed to be a very delirium of long pent-up hatred and impotent rebellion.

"Why were you ever born?" she cried, in a hoarse, suppressed tone. "Why were you ever born? I hated you at first. You were the living sign, never to be done away with, of my intolerable folly! I've hated you month by month and year by year. You were the never-to-be-forgotten pledge of what was passed and done with! I hate you now ten times and twenty times over. You've brought me to this!"

He lifted his head and looked at her. His face had a stricken look upon it. His voice seemed to come from very far away.

"Not I!" he said. "It is the hand of fate!"

"Fate!" she echoed. "Yes, it was fate that left me with you first, perhaps! I fought fate then, and won."

I put my will against the past, and wiped it out. I said that not a trace of it should live, and not a trace of it has lived—except in you ! ”

She stopped, throwing out one arm as in supreme denunciation, with a gesture of which the tragedy struck with indescribable incongruity against the coarse violence of her appearance. It was the awful incongruity that lay behind ; the unspeakable discrepancy between the indomitable power which had overborne all that stood in its path, and the sordid narrowness of the limitations in which it had worked ; materialized, and given visible form.

A strand of her grey hair had become loose and fallen about her. She lifted her hand and thrust it roughly back.

“ You’ll have to know the details, I suppose,” she said ; and the recklessness of her defiance flashed in her eyes, and rang in every tone of her voice. “ Then here they are. Nothing that you’ve ever heard about the past is true. I made a past, when I turned that page of my life of which you are the only trace, to fit the future that I meant to have. I was a solicitor’s daughter in a little country town, and I went away with your father when I was seventeen. I knew what I was doing well enough, but I didn’t care. He took me abroad, and he stayed with me constantly until you were born. Then he got tired of me. That was your fault ! ”

Her voice rose fiercely as she spoke the last words. North Branstons neither moved nor spoke. His face, haggard and drawn, was still turned to her, but he hardly seemed to see her. His dull and sunken eyes seemed to be looking beyond, looking at that not visible to any physical vision—the long vista of the terrible past, lighted up now and for ever as with flashes of lurid fire. She paused an instant and then went on.

"I was tired of the life by that time, too!" she said. "I wanted to get back. He behaved very well to me. He had been amusing himself before he settled down in life, and he was willing to pay for his amusement. He made me an allowance, and we separated."

"Why did you not own me?"

"Own you!" she cried passionately. "I wish I had killed you! I hated you, I say! I would not have you call me mother; I would not treat you as my child. There was a girl in the hotel where he left me with a step-sister who was only a baby. That put it into my head to call you my brother. Then I set to work to cover up all trace of what had been. I never drew the allowance; it would have been a link with the past, and I wanted him to lose sight of me. I came to England and worked. Before six months were over I read in a paper that he was gone to India. He belonged to one of the families whose doings are recorded in the papers, your father! Don't forget that!" She spoke with a wild, irrepressible sneer, passing her hand across her forehead, on which the drops stood thick, as she paused a moment. "Then I knew that I was safe," she went on. "I had no difficulty from the first. No one doubted me—I never gave them a chance. I got what I wanted. I became a married woman, respected and looked up to. I've had the position I intended to have, and no other woman could have filled it better than I have done! For eight-and-twenty years you were the only roughness in my life.

Her voice—vibrating with a coarse triumph so strangely disproportionate to the achievement of which she spoke; echoing with a spirit which, in the moment of her defeat, lit up the life thus baldly sketched with the strange pathos which hovers round futility and inadequacy—trembled with an intensity of vindictiveness, and she

stopped abruptly. But only for a moment. As though with that final statement of the satisfaction of her life there had rushed upon her anew the realization of what she had lost, a very frenzy of blind, unreasoning rebellion surged up in her, and she broke into a sudden furious torrent of speech.

"Fate!" she said, "you call it fate! It comes through you, from first to last! It comes through you. If you had never lived it never could have happened! If you had never seen this woman it never could have happened! If you—"

"Stop!"

Stumblingly and painfully North Branston had risen to his feet. The monosyllable had burst from him low and broken, but with that ringing in it before which even the rage of the half-maddened woman before him paused instinctively.

"Stop!" he cried again. "If it has come through me, it comes upon me also! If my existence is a curse to you, what else is it to me? We are two puppets in the hands of a power beyond us, bound together to our own destruction!"

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CHAPTER XXXV.

It was past ten o'clock in the morning, but in North Branston's sitting-room breakfast arrangements were waiting untouched on the table.

The room was not unoccupied, nevertheless. Pacing slowly up and down, with his head bent and his hands clasped behind his back, was Archdeacon French. Now and then he stopped, listening as though for some sound from the adjoining room ; only to resume his walk again with a heavy unconscious sigh.

Archdeacon French had carried out the intention half expressed to the young doctor as they turned away together from North's door on the previous day. He had returned later in the evening ; and he had seen North. He had listened to a few brief sentences, before which all human sympathy, even compassion itself, seemed to shrivel into an immeasurable inadequacy. He had found himself in the presence of that which reduced to nothingness all human aid ; and before that presence, at North Branston's own request for solitude, he had retreated.

The door which led into the adjoining room opened at last, and as the sound fell on his ear, Archdeacon French turned towards it with a start. No man of delicate perceptions can face the final moment, which brings him into contact with that which the elder man had now to meet, without an awestruck thrill.

It is not the difference created in the outward person-

ality of a man by the devastating power of a great catastrophe that strikes us first ; it is the sameness that confounds us. We know that that which was, is crushed for ever ; that that which is to be, is struggling to life in throes only to be guessed at. But the veil of the flesh remains intact. Our physical eyes see only the man whom we saw yesterday ; a little paler, a little more haggard, but essentially the same.

The two men met in silence, but it was Archdeacon French alone who was visibly moved. North Branston was absolutely composed.

"Have you been waiting long ?" he said.

His voice was low and toneless, but there was no strain about it.

Archdeacon French shook his head. His eyes were anxiously scanning the other's face, and the grip in which he still held North's hand seemed to represent his hold on his own self-control.

"Have you slept ?" he said.

North made a slight, indifferent gesture of negation. Archdeacon French drew away his hand and turned towards the breakfast-table.

"You have not breakfasted," he said. "You had better do it now."

North hesitated a moment. Then he walked up to the tray and poured himself out a cup of coffee. He drank it slowly. Then he took his watch from his pocket, and looked at the time.

It was the simplest every-day movement, and it was performed in the quietest and most matter-of-fact manner. But to Archdeacon French, as he watched the younger man, it came, with its suggestion of the inexorable sequences of time and action, as a sharp spur to the sense that had brought him to North's side this morning. There was an external aspect to this, as to all

other crises in human affairs ; an external aspect in which the steady support of a friend might be of some avail, as contrasted with that inward aspect from which friendship might only veil its face. The day must bring with it a train of consequences—those hideous cut-and-dried consequences which follow on the heels of tragedy, and which must be met and dealt with one by one.

Archdeacon French looked at North for a moment in silence.

“What can I do for you, North ?” he said.

His tone was eloquent of that which he would not put into words, and North looked round at him with a faint smile as though he heard and understood it from very far off.

“Thank you,” he said. “Nothing.”

“You are going to—to—”

“I am going to Wilton Street,” assented North.

A moment's silence followed, and just as the elder man was forcing himself to break it, it was broken from without. There was a hasty knock at the door, which was flung open almost on the same instant ; and on the threshold, crimson in the face and short of breath, an extraordinary mixture of agitation and pompousness, stood Dr. Vallotson.

“My dear boy !” he exclaimed. “My dear North, it's—it's true, then ? Dear, dear ! Tut, tut ! What does it mean ? I said there must be some mistake ! I wouldn't believe my own eyes ! What does it all mean ?”

The ghastly pause that followed was remembered by Archdeacon French to the last day of his life. North Branston had made no attempt to receive Dr. Vallotson ; neither by word nor sign had he evinced any surprise at his appearance. He stood gazing at his visitor in absolute silence—gazing at him as though the actual sense

of his words were something beside the mark ; gazing at him across a gulf which seemed to annul everything but a profound pity.

Interminable as the silence seemed, it was as a matter of fact hardly a moment before Archdeacon French, braced by the necessity for action, stepped forward.

"How do you do, Dr. Vallotson?" he said, with grave kindness, going through the formal greeting and obliging the little doctor to shake hands with him as a means of stilling his excitement. "I am afraid we must ask you first to tell us what it is that you have heard!"

"Heard!" echoed Dr. Vallotson, turning to him eagerly. "My dear sir, I saw it in the paper yesterday evening! Such a shock it gave me as I may safely say I never experienced in all my life before. I couldn't credit it! Such a—such an outrageous statement! And everybody in Alnchester seemed to have seen the paragraph! Why was I not written to; may I ask? Why was I not telegraphed for?"

"May I trouble you to tell us what the paragraph said?" asked Archdeacon French.

He had glanced quickly at North at the first mention of the evening paper, the anxiety deepening on his face. A newspaper report of the interruption of the marriage service was a contingency which had not occurred to him. But North had heard the words entirely unmoved ; the expression of his eyes as they rested on Dr. Vallotson remained unaltered.

The pinkness of Dr. Vallotson's complexion heightened, and his utterance grew almost incoherent in its excitement.

"It was headed 'Exciting Scene at a Fashionable Wedding!'" he said. "At a fashionable wedding, my dear sir! It stated that the marriage ceremony had been stopped at the last moment by a lady who was

understood to be the sister of the bridegroom, and it gave the names. There was exaggeration in it, of course — of course ! I am taking that for granted. But what has really happened ? That is what I really want to know ! What has really happened ? ”

There was an angry self-assertion about the elderly, high-pitched voice which was blended with dread ; and, as Dr. Vallotson's tones trembled into silence, North Branston moved for the first time. He looked across uncertainly, and with a mute questioning in his face, at Archdeacon French. Archdeacon French responded in his own way.

“ Go and keep your appointment, North,” he said. “ I will explain to Dr. Vallotson.”

For a moment North Branston paused. Then he bent his head.

“ Thank you ! ” he said.

And without another word he went out of the room ; he went down the stairs and out of the house, composed and quiet still.

There is a state of feeling, when the whole life is crushed, in which the anguish of the process is merged in a dull sense of the power by which it is brought about.

In the shattering of the very foundations of North Branston's world even the rocks, on which so much that was best in him had met with shipwreck, had sunk beneath him. His life was crushed to atoms. He was a man without a hope ; without even a name. But in the upheaval by which this had been brought about, the shadow of his life, at which he had girded, against which he had fought, had risen above the sphere of human agency or human strife ; had changed into a presence, awful and incomprehensible. Stunned as he was, all that was strongest and best in North Branston had risen

up instinctively to meet the force that was about him, in the silence of blind acquiescence.

About the house in Wilton Street, gaily decorated with fresh flowers for the wedding day, there hung a pitifully incongruous air of festivity. But North did not notice it. The door was opened to him directly he rang; the servant who had admitted him hesitated for a moment, and then with a low-toned and rather frightened "This way, sir, please," she led the way to the little room which Lady Karlake had been in the habit of using as a morning-room.

The room was empty, and the woman closed the door upon North and disappeared. North crossed the room mechanically, but he did not sit down. The next instant the door was opened with a rapid, nervous touch; and Lady Karlake appeared. She was crossing the room with swift, impulsive movements to where North Branston stood, when he slowly lifted his head and turned towards her. And as her eyes fell on his face she stopped short.

On a physique such as Lady Karlake's, eighteen hours such as those through which she had just passed, leave traces patent to all the world. She had come into the room pale, with nervous lines of suspense and dread quivering round her mouth, her eyes unnaturally large and bright, and with the dark hollows of sleeplessness encircling them. But as she saw North Branston's face, all those tokens of pain and agitation faded into insignificance before the ghastly dread that woke slowly in her eyes, and seemed to creep over every feature.

"North! North!"

The two words came from her the merest whisper, a cry wrung from the overstrung nerves, stretched now to a pitch of unendurable tension. North heard it, for his lips twitched slightly, but he did not speak; he only looked at her. The next moment she had come up to

him with a wild, rushing movement, and her fingers had closed upon his arm.

"North!" she said, "North! tell me what it is!"

On the instant, as her touch fell on his arm, a sharp shiver shook North Branston. It passed, and he stood motionless.

"Take away your hand," he said. His voice was thick, and his utterance not quite distinct. "Don't touch me! There is an awful atmosphere about us both which holds us separate."

Slowly, very slowly, as though mesmerized by his eyes, Lady Karslake drew back her hand. It was a slight action enough, but it seemed to put an extraordinary distance between them, and it was succeeded by a moment's pause. The pause was broken by Lady Karslake. She spoke slowly, and in a low vibrating voice.

"Separate?" she said. "You and I? That is not possible?"

A grey shade was stealing even over North Branston's lips.

"Our possible and impossible," he answered, "are empty words. We use them as we will; we give them a significance which we declare to be inalienable and eternal. But the time comes which brings them into contact with that which shrivels them to nothing—the possible and impossible spoken not by us but to us!"

"By whom?" she said steadily; her eyes were flashing.

"By—destiny!"

She clasped and unclasped her hands with a quick movement. "Destiny is an abstract phrase; as to its practical bearing on life we can argue at our leisure. It is no such shadow that we have before us now! Whatever it may be that has come between us, it comes to us through your sister! Her influence has been against us

from the first. She has stood between us, poisoning our happiness, jarring our love, since the hour when you told her of our engagement. By what right? That she should stand between us at the last moment, that she should put us asunder when we stood on the very verge of union which nothing could destroy, is the culmination only of the atmosphere which she has brought about us—which I have felt and struggled against and recognized against my will as her creation—during this last horrible fortnight. How does she justify herself? What has she to say?"

She stopped. Gradually, as she spoke, her voice had gathered force and volume, though she had not raised it by a tone. She faced him with her head raised, her eyes flashing with an antagonism, a proud demand for satisfaction; a long pent-up rebellion, such as seemed to possess her to the total exclusion of any sense either of fear or dread.

For one moment North Branston's eyes rested on her face; rested on it with a lingering, unconscious gaze as if for the last time. It was significant of his sense of the inexorableness of that law of which the working was to crush them both, that he made no attempt to soften by any tenderness that from which he had no power to save her.

He paused a moment only, and then, with every muscle braced and rigid, he spoke in a thin, steady tone.

"I have no sister," he said. "The woman to whom I have given that name is my mother."

Heavily conscious that he must give her time, that to stun her was of no avail, that he could save her nothing, he stopped, watching her face. He saw it whiten to the lips as though her heart had given one horrified leap; he saw it relax into a shocked, bewildered repulsion; he saw it change again; he saw everything fade from it but the look of exquisite pity and tenderness which was for

him alone ; he knew that her hands were outstretched towards him, and he felt rather than heard her words.

"North ! Oh, my poor North !"

Then he spoke again.

"Wait !" he said. "If any human being could take upon himself the endless sequence of results that follow on a deed, I would stop here. That cannot be. Not she alone, not I alone, can work out what has waited its development till now. She and I, and you, are linked together by the power which crushes us all three. And the tie that holds us each to each is the tie that holds us to the same man."

His first words—either by the solemnity of hopelessness with which they rang, or by something in his face of which he was unconscious—had arrested her movement towards him. Her hands had sunk slowly by her side. A ghastly, creeping fear had risen slowly in her eyes, stilling their tenderness into a helpless, fascinated stare. Her lips moved as though she repeated his last words, but no sound was audible. With a blind sense that the watch, even of his eyes, was all that he could spare her, North Branston turned away.

"The man I mean was once your husband," he said hoarsely. "And I curse the day when he was born, although he was my father !"

The clock was still ticking. He heard that, though there was a roaring in his ears that should have drowned the sound of cannon. There seemed to be no other sound in the room. Then, stilling that roaring on the very instant, there reached his brain the slightest possible rustling, as of a woman's dress. He turned sharply. The slender woman's figure which had heard his words erect and rigid, standing for an instant motionless, as a man does sometimes, wounded to death, was swaying heavily from side to side. With an inarticulate cry he caught

her in his arms, and in another instant he was kneeling by her side as she lay upon the sofa. She was conscious still, and he saw it.

"Eve," he cried thickly, and his voice was like an inarticulate prayer to that power which he felt but did not know, "Eve, my love! We are in the hands of Fate."

She drew away the hand he held, shivering away from him as she lay prone, her face pressed down upon the cushions. And as though in that slight gesture there was materialized the division that had fallen for ever between them, North Branston rose to his feet, blindly and mechanically, and turned away. The agony that unites is endurable. It is when the power that crushes, isolates; it is when the helpless human creature finds itself alone with the horror of great darkness that has fallen on it, that the heights of humanity's capacity for suffering are reached.

The room was very still; so still that the little tapping sound made by the tassel of the blind, as the September breeze moved it to and fro against the window-ledge, struck out with a hard, echoing noise. The man and woman alone together, and yet so infinitely far apart, had passed beyond the region whence any sound or movement penetrated to the world of sense, as they had passed beyond the region where time is of any account. How long the clutch of realization held them, whether the moments were many or few, concerned them not at all. It held them still and helpless, and did its work.

There was a long, faint sigh—the expression merely of physical sensation—as of a woman who struggles slowly back to life after long unconsciousness. It touched the silence and died away again. Then Lady Karlake stirred. A slight shiver as of bitter cold ran through her from head to foot. She raised herself and sat up, sup-

porting herself with one hand upon the back of the sofa, gazing straight before her with dull, unseeing eyes, as if mainly conscious for the moment of physical exhaustion. North Branston, standing with his back to her, his head bowed forward on his arms as they rested on the mantelpiece, stirred slightly on the sound of her movement, but he did not lift his head.

"I am not mad ? I am not mad ?"

The question formed itself on her lips slowly, monotonously, almost indifferently ; and she sat quite motionless, all the mobility of her face dead beneath a kind of stupor. As though her voice, so changed, had pierced his very heart, North turned sharply towards her. His quiet gave way, and he broke into a hoarse, despairing cry.

"Eve ! Eve ! If you could have been spared ! If you could have been spared !"

For the first time since the blow had fallen on him, for the first time since he had found himself confronted with the power which had laid his life in ruins, there had risen in him that bitterest of all realizations : the realization of the impotency of regret, the helplessness of love itself. He let his head fall forward on his arm again with a hopeless choking groan.

She had turned her face towards him quickly : not moving otherwise, however, but letting her eyes rest upon him. She did not speak, but she put up both her hands and pushed the hair back from her forehead, pressing down her fingers as though to still some pulse that throbbed and beat too painfully.

The stupor of her face was breaking up, was growing thin ; and through it, fitfully revealed, there dawned a great and striking change. It was as though, in that dreadful period of stillness, something had come to life in her, dormant until now ; something by which her

whole nature was vivified, and endowed with forces wholly new to it. The sensitive, impulsive temperament, pushed too far, had touched the limits where the possibilities of rebellion, always latent in such a nature, assert themselves an active force. The nervous, capricious instincts of the wilful woman's heart, too roughly seared, had broken all the bonds that held them and passed into the realms of passion. The lines of her face seemed to grow stronger, forged by the fire that glowed deeper and deeper in her eyes. There was a desperate daring about the set of her lips, and an indescribable suggestion of recklessness now about the defiant pose of her head.

"Why should we not spare ourselves?"

Her voice was not raised, but in its low, distinct tones there was an intensity of feeling which no cry could have touched. She watched him with dilated, feverish eyes, and saw him lift his head suddenly, not turning to her, but looking straight before him. Then she spoke again.

"We stand alone together, you and I," she said, and something seemed to beat and thrill in her voice, held down, forced into abeyance with a power of self-control as strange in her as that which it restrained. "We are the creatures of the present, not of the past! The past did not give us to one another; the past cannot part us. That which binds us to one another cuts us off from all the world beside, from the world of the living and—from the world of the dead."

Her voice, grown hoarse and low, stopped abruptly; and in the breathless silence that followed, North Branston turned slowly and looked at her. His face was seared and drawn, as in the extremity of mortal conflict. His eyes were ghastly; they were the eyes of a man in whom all manhood's instincts have risen into writhing, tumultuous life; have risen to meet in desperate,

agonizing struggle that which must dominate them or be dominated by them for ever. As she met them, the flame burst through its wrappings once for all, and Lady Karslake sprang to her feet, her head thrown back, one arm outstretched in passionate accentuation of her speech.

"By what right?" she cried, and her voice rang out for the first time full and vibrating. "By what right are we condemned? How are we altered, you and I, the man and the woman whose hearts are to be broken, that that which we held yesterday we must resign to-day? By what fault of our own are we judged? By what deed of our own are we crushed? Why should we take upon ourselves the punishment which we have never earned? There is no law, there is no power, can justify injustice such as that! There is no force can bring us to submission to what is without reason, without right! We love each other! Let us hold to that! We love each other, you and I, isolated individuals, free, unfettered man and woman. Let us stand fast on that, come what come will!"

"It cannot be!"

He stood quite still, facing her, one hand resting heavily on the mantelpiece. All personal sensation seemed to have left him; nothing in his ashen face seemed to belong to life at all except his eyes, dark and unfathomable. The three words came from him heavy, monotonous, touched with the immutability of the shadow beneath which he stood.

She heard him, and the words seemed to fall on her as an unexpected blow might have done. She threw out her hands instinctively as though to protect herself, and then she paused.

"You don't understand," she said. Her voice was low and quick, and something seemed to grate in her throat.

"You don't understand what that means! It means—parting! Don't you see? It means that we shall never see each other again! It is all or nothing! We must ignore everything, we must deny and defy everything, or—Don't you see? Don't you see? North, North!" Her voice rose into a broken cry. "Have we so lightly learned what love may mean that we can throw it by like this? We are not children! Love has come to us unsought, unasked; the solution given to us of the problem of life. We have misunderstood it, jarred it, misused it; but we will not give it up! We cannot! We cannot!"

Drawn instinctively by the agony of her appeal, he had come closer to her; he held her hands in his, held them close against his heart as though he would have given her, with its very life-beats, that strength which his self-conquest had brought to him.

"We must!" he said hoarsely. "That which is against us is not to be struggled with, not to be defied! We must submit!"

"Submit!" She had torn herself out of his hands, and she flung the word back at him, throbbing and burning with the wild passion of scorn that blazed in her eyes and knit up every quivering line of her face into a magnificent mask through which despair could not and would not break. "Submit! You may submit, I never will! It is your love that fails! Remember that! Your love? I said that we had learned what love might mean—that was not true! You have not learned! You'll never learn! What has it been from first to last? A travesty, a shadow, a broken reed! When has it stood between me and myself? Never! When has it stood between you and your cares? Never! What wonder that it cannot stand now between us and the shadow that divides us—the shadow you call destiny. Destiny?

If you had ever known what love meant, you would know that there is no destiny higher than love, that love is the one power by which we stand or fall ! ”

Before the quivering, unreasoning words had died away, touched into a sudden agony of perception which he had never known before, North Branston's voice took up the word as he faced her with his face convulsed and working like her own.

“It is !” he cried. “It is ! And saying that says all. It is my love that stands between us and ourselves. It is my love that strangles in me all that would take from you the sacrifice you offer. It is my love that holds me fast to all that we may hope for now—submission. It is my love that saves us both ! ”

The air was thick and dark about him, but he saw her hands flung out towards him, whether in repudiation or entreaty he did not know. He caught them in his own and drew her to him, kissing her only once as he might have kissed her dead. He felt her figure relax and lose its tension as he held her, and then he laid her gently down.

A moment later, and from the darkness of the room he had passed into the blacker darkness of the world without.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

UTTER devastation. The breaking-up of all that had been ; the blighting of all that which was to come. The total withering—as before the hot poisonous wind, blown up from a waste place of the earth, all healthful and beautiful vegetation withers—of all the hopes, the happiness, the peace of those who lay through no fault of their own within the sphere of the malignant influence risen from the past. In the midst of all this desolation, the woman through whom all those bound to her were doomed ; the woman whose concealed sin had pushed its roots so far that its plucking up was as the shaking of the solid earth ; the woman upon whom the hand of retribution had fallen once and for all, sat callous, sullen, indifferent to all but the brooding, consuming passion of her own boundless rebellion.

Five-and-thirty years before, the girl from whom this woman was developed, ill-taught, undisciplined, had left her home deliberately, knowing full well for what position she was leaving it. Love had played but a small part in the sordid little drama. She had been flattered by the attentions of a man belonging to a class above her, and a coarse fibre ingrain in her nature had responded to his advances. But with that first indulgence of her passions that fibre had changed its character. Vice ceased to attract her. The life which lay before her became abhorrent to her practical sense. And all the strength of her nature tended towards that dominance

which is compatible to a middle-class mind with respectability alone. Hard and clear-sighted in her youth as in her age, she had encouraged the separation always contemplated by her child's father. She had put the past behind her and trodden it under foot. Entirely devoid of imagination, she had reasoned out a fabrication of falsehood so simple and so definite that her life had seemed to rear itself thereupon as on a rock of truth. She had created a past for herself, as she had said to North Branston, and she created a future. She was essentially the type of woman of whom autocrats are made. She met Dr. Vallotson and took possession of her dominion.

And now it was all over. The long dominance and success of her life, the social prestige of a country town, the domestic supremacy of a middle-class household, were lost to her for ever. She stood confessed the mother of a nameless son ; a woman fallen, disgraced, covered with ignominy.

Mrs. Vallotson made no attempt of any kind to deal with the ruin she had dealt about her.

A heavy curtain had descended between herself and the world, shutting in all that force of character, fostered and moulded by thirty years' dominion, shutting out all on which that force had spent itself. The coarse unyielding power thus deprived of outlet concentrated itself within, and all the strength which had forestalled for all these years the moment of defeat arrayed itself in fierce defiance of that greater power, which had held that moment in reserve to bid it strike upon the clock of fate at last. There are natures to which the very fact that they are conquered is its own worst punishment. Such a nature was Mrs. Vallotson's. She was defeated ; the ground was cut from under her feet ; that which her will had been set to keep was wrested from her in her

own despite, and every fibre of her being was alive with the impotent fury of her resentment. No sense of shame, no sense of remorse was possible to her. She was defeated. A sullen intensity of scorn and rage and hatred possessed her, to the exclusion of any other thought or feeling.

Wrapped in the thick darkness of her self-created isolation, her figure loomed through the events of the week that followed, the centre on which all their tragedy turned. The ghastly readjustment of life, which is the inevitable consequence of all convulsion, had to go on; the terrible details had to be faced, the pitiful arrangements had to be thought out, had to be put into words; and between that stony figure and the little world which it had blighted, bearing the brunt of the work that must be done, as he bore the brunt of the blow that had fallen, stood North Branston.

It is not an uncommon thing for a weak man wronged to harden; it is not an uncommon thing for a selfish man, outraged, to turn upon the outrager with that vindictive bitterness of repudiation or condemnation which outraged charity never knows. But Dr. Vallotson's attitude, as the first wave of comprehension and realization receded from him, gave to the week that followed its final shade of darkness in the rigid mercilessness of its personal resentment. All his most marked characteristics, characteristics kept in solution, held within the most trivial lines by the placid circumstances of his life, his self-sufficiency, his self-conceit, his love of ease, seemed to be solidified, in the crisis in which he found himself, into one burning sense of insult. His wife's word had been his law for five-and-twenty years; and in proportion to his submission was the bitterness of his renunciation of her and the implacability of his anger. That she was as dead to him henceforward, that his

house was her home no longer, was the foregone conclusion on which all his denunciation turned.

That her claims as a wife were annulled for ever was the foregone conclusion also on which all North Branston's acts and words turned. With the tremendous knowledge that had risen to overthrow his life, all that which had its birth in ignorance had passed into oblivion ; the antagonism which had poisoned his relations with the woman who had thwarted him in the past, had ceased to exist for him towards the woman who had crushed him in the present. She was his mother. The bond between them, against which he had struggled all his life, had suddenly acquired for him a meaning deep and mysterious. She was his mother, and they stood alone together in the world. Her home henceforth must be with him. Her protector henceforth must be himself.

He made his preparations for the altered life that lay before him, with a stern depth of composure that hung about him like a solemn emanation of that dark shadow in which he walked. To Lady Karlake's nearest male relation he sent a brief explanation of the interruption of the marriage ceremony, and he received an acknowledgment in which sympathy and personal feeling were somewhat stiffly blended, and relaxing into a statement to the effect that Lady Karlake was going abroad as soon as she could travel. The breaking off of the wedding had been public. The cause of it, or such a garbled version of the cause as commended itself to the taste of the people who made a nine days' wonder of it, was necessarily common property ; and North Branston in his altered circumstances was no longer available for that social position which was essential for Dr. Slade-Fenton's partner. It was by North himself that the first steps were taken towards the dissolution of that partnership ; those first steps which Dr. Slade-Fenton, in spite of the

clamours of his wife and of Miss Kenderdine, in spite of his own practical sense of their necessity, was loth to hurry on. The house which was to have been Lady Karslake's home was put into the hands of a house agent ; and another was taken by North in a quiet district out of the radius of fashionable life, and within easy reach of the hospital, within the walls of which his professional work was to be concentrated.

Nothing that lay before him to be done was evaded by North ; he neglected nothing ; he spared himself nothing. It was through the agency of Archdeacon French, rather than on any impulse of his own, that any meeting between himself and Dr. Vallotson was delayed until all the arrangements for the future were practically completed. Archdeacon French's friendship and countenance was the one steady support that had never failed North through those days. The fact that it was from his lips that Dr. Vallotson had learned the truth gave to the Archdeacon a position which enabled, and indeed compelled, him to stand, in the first stress and shock, between the husband and son. Dr. Vallotson's earliest impulses had taken shape in a violent assertion of his intention of never seeing again either his wife or her son ; and the earliest stages of the communication necessary between the man who transferred and the man who took up responsibilities, were conducted through the Archdeacon. But that the meeting should take place at last was one of those necessities, subtle and hard to fathom, which force their way insidiously and gradually into a man's inner consciousness, and must perforce be met. The final severance could only be accomplished face to face.

On the subject of Constance, not one word had been uttered either by or to North. The blow that must be dealt her lay not with him to deal, but with her father ;

and during the first few days she entered not at all into his overlaiden thoughts. But, perhaps by force of the silence that rested about her, she gradually assumed for him the position of a factor in the situation ; and a factor from whom something was to be expected. The realization that she was, as he was himself, the child of the woman whose harvest of tares they were all reaping began to press home to his consciousness, and he wondered heavily what action she would take. Side by side with this consideration there dawned in him, as the days went by, a sense of some faint stir, some undercurrent of expectancy which seemed to touch the sullen, immovable taciturnity of Mrs. Vallotson's demeanour. She never spoke of it. It was grimly significant of her attitude towards him that all the passions that raged within her entrenched themselves in his presence behind a barrier of frozen silence.

But it was no surprise to him, it was almost a relief, when two brief sentences broke from her at last, fiercely and reluctantly, as though against her will.

"Who is it that keeps Constance from me? I want to see her !"

It had scarcely needed the words to bring North Branston face to face with the necessity for speech on the subject with Constance's father.

The September sun was still hot, the September sky was as bright as it had been when North Branston passed from beneath its light into the shadow of the church, when the morning came which was to see the final winding up of the grinding period of transition in the meeting between Dr. Vallotson and North. It was the wish of both men that Archdeacon French should be present at the interview, which was to take place at Dr. Vallotson's hotel ; and about eleven o'clock in the morning the Archdeacon entered North Branston's rooms.

The greater part of North's own goods had already been removed to the house of which he was to take personal possession on the following day. The sitting-room had a bare, dismantled aspect. North was sitting at a table, drawn into the centre of the room, writing. He met his expected visitor with a word of welcome.

There was a quiet commonplace comment or two from Archdeacon French as to the progress of North's packing, and the appearance of the room, answered in the same style. Then North said briefly,—

“Shall we go?”

And a few moments later the two emerged into the street in silence.

They pursued their way along the busy streets, and that silence remained unbroken. But though he did not speak, Archdeacon French's thought was concentrated on the composed figure by whom he was walking in such silent fellowship. The suffering that makes no complaint; that lays no claim to pity; that stands aloof, even unconsciously, from the sympathy that cannot probe its depths; is of all the most terrible to witness.

He roused himself with a sigh as they reached their destination, and glanced at North. The younger man signed gravely to him to lead the way. Archdeacon French passed on up the stairs; he paused before a door, knocked, and opened it.

Shrunken, tremulous, speechless with agitation, the figure which drew itself with such a pitiful assumption of dignity out of the half-collapsed position into which it had sunk in its easy-chair, looked like the merest shadow of the pompous, excited, offended little man who had burst into North Branstons's sitting-room a few days before. Dr. Vallotson's portly little figure had fallen away, and his clothes hung loosely upon it; his cheeks,

their colouring replaced by an ashen pallor, hung flabbily ; and there was a loose-lipped misery of bitterness about his mouth which was indescribably pitiable. He did not seem to see Archdeacon French. He looked past him at the figure entering behind him, and for the moment it seemed as though his agitation would choke him.

Then, with a violent effort, the effort of an almost pathetic pride, he mastered himself. He looked away from North to Archdeacon French, holding out to the latter a hand that shook pitifully.

"Very good of you to come," he said in a low voice. "Very considerate."

He wrung the elder man's hand, and then he turned again to North Branstons. There was something about his manner, agitated, shaken with offended majesty, which seemed to set the position between them—half unconsciously, half involuntarily—as between the outraged and one of the parties to the outrage.

"I believe," he said, "I believe that the sense of the necessity for this—this painful interview—is mutual !"

North bent his head gravely with a gesture that tacitly accepted the position assigned to him. As his eyes fell first upon the poor little man, a painful spasm had passed across his face, leaving it as pitiful as it was steady and controlled.

"It seems, as you say, sir, a necessity," he replied.

There was a moment's pause. Archdeacon French, with a delicate sense of the requirements and non-requirements of the situation, had drawn a little apart. North, with deliberate respect, yielded to Dr. Vallotson the right to dominate the interview, and waited in silence. Dr. Vallotson, his breath coming painfully, his face twitching nervously, was struggling with his agitation.

"We—we need not prolong it!" he said at last, with a kind of trembling stiffness. "A few words will suffice. I have no desire to enter into my feelings—I may say, indeed, that I am quite unable to do so."

His voice seemed to catch in his throat and choke him, and he stopped abruptly. Then, evidently annoyed with himself for the exhibition of weakness, he went on,—

"With regard to my intentions, however, there must be no misunderstanding. This meeting is intended to obviate any such possibility."

"Quite so."

"I should prefer, if possible, to mention no names," continued Dr. Vallotson. "You will understand to whom I refer when I say that my decision with regard to that person, already conveyed to you, is final. I am not to be approached on the subject at any future time."

"The understanding on that point is perfectly clear. All future responsibility devolves on me."

The deep, quiet voice, the unflinching manner, seemed for the first time to arrest Dr. Vallotson's self-centred attention. He hesitated and looked at North.

"I should have been willing," he said, "I believe you are aware that I should have been willing to provide—"

North stopped him, quietly but instantly.

"All future responsibility devolves on me," he repeated; and the accent on the first word seemed to close the question for ever.

"So—so I have understood," said Dr. Vallotson falteringly.

He glanced round instinctively, and as though somewhat at a loss, to where Archdeacon French stood. But the Archdeacon, though he met the uncertain, miserable glance, made no attempt to interfere; and there was another painful pause. It was broken this time by North.

"There is one point," he said, "and only one, I think, on which a further understanding is necessary. No allusion has as yet been made, in arranging for the future, to Constance."

"To Constance?"

The words had come from Constance's father in a kind of gasp of outraged amazement; and at the same moment Archdeacon French stirred slightly. North's words came as a surprise to him also. Then Dr. Vallotson spoke with tremulous loftiness.

"I fail to see," he said, "in what connection any allusion to my daughter is necessary."

North did not answer immediately, and when at last he spoke, the gentleness of his voice seemed to show that he had paused so to choose his words as to render that which he had to say as little painful as might be.

"She is her mother's daughter also," he said. "Can those rights be wholly forfeited? Can those obligations be wholly cancelled? Are the two not to meet again?"

"With my good will, sir, never!" returned Dr. Vallotson, with vehement agitation. "There are offences before which all rights are forfeited—all rights, let me tell you—and fraud and deception are not the least of these. If the exercise of my authority were necessary it would be exerted, it would be enforced to the uttermost, to prevent any further intercourse between my daughter and the person of whom you speak. But it is as well that you should know that it is not necessary. My daughter feels on the subject as I do, sir! As I do!"

An abrupt exclamation broke from North Branston. Something of agitation touched him for the first time.

"Constance!" he said. "A mere girl! Is it possible that she repudiates her mother?"

"It is not only possible," returned Dr. Vallotson pompously, "it is the fact. My daughter's feelings on

the subject are too painful a matter for discussion. I must beg you to consider the subject closed."

A moment of fierce struggle betrayed itself in North's face ; then the stillness of acceptance fell on it again.

"There is nothing more to be said, then," he said.

"May we consider the interview at an end ?" said Dr. Vallotson majestically. He glanced again towards Archdeacon French as he spoke, and this time the Archdeacon, his face sad and troubled, drew nearer in response to the look.

The interview was at an end ; the time had come when the paths of the two men were to part for ever ; but, with the moment actually upon them, neither moved. They stood confronting one another for an instant in silence. Then, with a slight, grave inclination of his head, North Branston turned away.

But as he moved, Dr. Vallotson took two hurried, trembling steps towards him, and stretched out his hand.

"Good-bye, my boy," he said brokenly. "Heaven help us both ! Heaven help us both !"

North Branston caught the hand held out to him and wrung it close.

"Good-bye, sir," he said hoarsely. "Good-bye !"
And so they parted.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A COLD March wind was chilling London through and through. It was blowing straight from the north-east, and it had driven up heavy masses of lead-coloured cloud which drifted slowly and broodingly across the sky. All colour seemed to have been shrivelled out of the world. Streets and houses seemed to have taken on a monotone of neutral tint, which was inexpressibly depressing. Smartly dressed women were shut up in broughams; and the mass of working womanhood, whose care-laden steps cover the length and breadth of London from morning until night, was in its dreariest bad weather garb. Every now and then sharp storms of bitter rain broke; adding yet another element of chill discomfort in the mud and slush which they created.

Even a large hospital, with its inevitable monotony, is hardly proof against such atmospheric conditions; and about a certain great building in the east of London there hung an all-pervading gloom. The colour-washed corridor and the stone staircases, with their faint, penetrating odour of disinfectants and anæsthetics, looked cheerless and dark, although it was only four o'clock in the afternoon; and the few footsteps that passed to and fro echoed desolately enough in the quiet.

Passing up the first flight of one of the staircases were two men—one of the hospital porters and Bryan Armitage. They went on in silence up another flight of stairs and along a narrow corridor, and then the porter stopped and threw open a door. The room

thus revealed was a cross between a doctor's consulting room and a private study.

"If you will walk in here, sir," said the man, addressing Bryan deferentially, "Dr. Branston will be at liberty before long. You will find the day's papers on the table, sir!"

"Thanks!" returned Bryan, pleasantly. "I'm a little before my time, I'm afraid."

"No, sir, I believe not. The rounds take a little longer some days than others. The doctor's going through the wards, sir."

The man stirred the fire; an attention which, since the guest was unknown to him, was obviously due to the host's position in the hospital; and turning a chair invitingly towards it, withdrew.

Bryan, however, did not take possession of the seat thus tacitly suggested to him. He walked up to the fireplace, and took up a standing position on the hearth-rug facing the room. He had grown considerably older-looking in the time which had elapsed since he went abroad; and the lines into which his face was settling were very good ones. They were very attractive also; partly, as of old, by reason of the honest kindliness which they seemed to radiate, and partly by reason of a certain steady wistfulness which seemed to underlie the quick and ready sense of humour with which every feature was instinct. His figure had grown broader and less boyish in outline, and his whole manner and appearance had lost that nameless disadvantage which is only to be defined as provincialism.

In spite of that same self-possession, however, it was obvious as he stood there waiting that he was distinctly nervous. His eyes wandered restlessly over his surroundings, and he was a trifle pale.

Bryan had returned to England only a few days before,

after an absence of ten months. He had heard through an Alnchester correspondent of the tragedy that had shattered Dr. Vallotson's household, and he had written to North at the time—a few lines of feeling too deep to be anything but incoherent in its expression. North had been Bryan Armitage's hero all his life. What unsuspected delicacy of perception had attracted him as a boy towards his unresponsive and unpopular senior it is not possible to say ; but the attraction had never faded. As boy and as man, he had given to North Branston that admiring affection which asks for no encouragement ; which overlooks—or perhaps in all unconsciousness sees through—the defects which mark its object out for universal condemnation. He had seen North last, free from those trammels of which he had been vaguely conscious as Alnchester's creation ; with success in his hand, with the ball of life at his feet. The change in North which he had then detected was utterly forgotten by him now. The hard, contemptuous patronage which had replaced the careless friendliness with which he himself had always been treated, had faded into the background of his memory. He realized only the gulf which lay between what had been and what was. Tender of feeling, vivid—where his sympathies were concerned—in imagination, he was dominated by that poignancy of realization always engendered by a first meeting with one who comes from out the fire of great suffering. As he stood there in North's room, waiting for its owner, his agitation annihilated the six months that had passed since the blow had fallen, and its horror had returned upon him in all its first intensity.

He had been waiting perhaps a quarter of an hour when a step which he recognized sounded along the passage, and North Branston came into the room. He came quickly forward as his visitor advanced to meet him.

"I am afraid you have had to wait, Bryan, boy," he said. "How are you?"

There was no verbal answer. Resolute as he was to add nothing by his agitation to the inevitable pain of the meeting, in that first moment Bryan Armitage found speech beyond him. He could only wring the hand held out to him as though he would never let it go. A slight grave smile just touched North's lips, and then, as though to give the younger man time to recover himself, he turned away and drew up another chair to the fire, speaking rather lengthily as he did so of the route by which Bryan had come to the hospital, and the length of time it had taken.

Nearly six months had gone by since that chasm which divided past from present had opened in North Branston's life, and those six months had brought to his external personality a change which was not the less striking in that it was very difficult to trace it to its source. Such casual acquaintances as he encountered in these days told one another that "Branston was amazingly aged," basing their criticism upon the fact that the hair about his temples had grown very grey, and upon the worn lines visible about his eyes; but time alone could not have produced the difference which was thus sweepingly characterized. The dark irregular features, a little haggard as though with ceaseless strain, remained practically unaltered; but the expression that informed them was that of a different man. The composure which had fallen on it with the shattering of his life rested on it still, and beneath it all the cynicism, the bitterness, the hardness which had constituted the meaning of his face hitherto had subsided. But that composure itself had changed its character. It was the deliberate and determined self-control of a man whose daily life is a life of endurance. His very voice told the same story. It was the voice of

a man the first of whose daily obligations is the obligation of patience.

Some influence from North's manner seemed to touch and still Bryan Armitage's nervousness. He answered North in a low voice and briefly, but coherently, and it was he who broke the moment's pause that followed as they sat down.

"It is very good of you to let me come, North," he said.

North's smile was a singularly fleeting expression, but it gave something to his face of which he was utterly unconscious. He smiled now.

"I am very glad to see you," he said. "Tell me your news."

Never in all the years of their acquaintance had similar words been addressed to Bryan Armitage by his elder, in the tone of unconscious sympathy and interest in which they were uttered now, and a flush of vague pleasure mounted to the young man's face. He recounted with frank and involuntary eagerness such details of his doings during the past months as suggested themselves to his modest mind as interesting ; drawn on by pleasant comments and questions from his hearer ; and he stopped at last rather abruptly, self-convicted of having talked exclusively of his own affairs.

There was a pause, which North, perhaps understanding on what topic the younger man must perforce wish to touch, forbore to break.

Then Bryan Armitage leaned suddenly forward, looking straight into the fire, and began to speak in a low, jerking tone.

"I wrote to you here, North," he said, "because I didn't know your address. Where do you live ? "

The words in which North Branston answered were brief and matter of fact, but there was nothing for-

bidding about their tone ; and the younger man, still with his eyes averted, went on,—

“I heard,” he said, with a difficult note of interrogation in his voice, “that you were living with—with——”

He faltered and left his sentence unfinished.

North finished it for him.

“My mother is with me,” he said.

The words were spoken perfectly steadily. There was nothing strange or unfamiliar in them to the speaker now. The very deliberation with which they were uttered was intended merely to accustom Bryan Armitage to what was still so new and painful to him. But to the young man’s face they brought the colour in a hot rush.

“Yes,” he said hurriedly. “I—I understood so !” He paused, and then he said in a tone which was hardly audible : “How is—Mrs. Vallotson ?”

A slight, unconscious shade crossed North’s face. There was a touch of constraint in his voice as he said,—

“She is fairly well, I think.”

“Is she—does she—might I call ?”

The shade had died away from North’s face as he turned to the speaker. But he shook his head.

“No, Bryan,” he said gently, and rather sadly. “I wish you might ! But it would be of no use, thank you. She sees nobody !”

With an uncertain gesture of acquiescence, Bryan looked back again into the fire, and there was an eloquent silence.

“Can you tell me—do you mind my asking—how they are getting on at Alnchester ?”

The words had broken from Bryan, uneven and a little hoarse in tone ; North, hearing them, seemed to rouse himself from the abstraction into which he had fallen.

"They are abroad," he said. "I hear of them only through Archdeacon French, but I hear often. They have been in the South of France for the last two months."

Bryan Armitage started painfully.

"Not for—for their health?" he exclaimed.

"No," returned North. "They are both quite well. They are coming home next month." He stopped and then added quietly: "Physical health is not the only thing that travel is good for."

"They have not left Alnchester for good?"

"No," said North again in a low voice. "Dr. Vallotson decided otherwise."

"Would it have been better, do you think?"

North raised his hand and let it fall on the arm of his chair with a slow movement of uncertainty.

"He was the only possible judge," he said.

There was another silence. Bryan's fingers were working unconscious destruction, as he leaned forward and unceasingly twisted the handle of a table drawer near him.

"North," he said tentatively and not quite steadily, "would you mind telling me how Constance took it? I'm a brute to ask you, but I haven't heard a word of her. I wrote to her—I couldn't help it—but she didn't answer! You see—you see——"

"Don't mind asking me," said North with grave kindness. "I cannot tell you much, I'm afraid. I wish I could, Bryan!"

"She has seen her mother since?"

"No!"

With a quick, startled movement Bryan lifted his bent head.

"No?" he repeated. "Why—was that Mrs. Vallotson's wish?"

"No," repeated North sternly, "it was her father's wish, but it was also Constance's own."

"Constance's own?" repeated Bryan incredulously. "Constance's? Why, I thought—I thought——"

"You were mistaken," was the grim response. "I was mistaken, though that is less surprising."

"But do you think it is right, North?"

There was a disturbed ring in Bryan's voice, and his face was full of perplexity and pain. North looked at him for a moment, and then said,—

"No, Bryan."

With a long breath, as though his ideas had received such a shock as necessitated their entire readjustment, the younger man sank back in his chair, gazing straight before him. North watched him silently, and then realizing better than did Bryan himself that the process of readjustment was not to be accomplished without time and pain, he broke up the pause with some words on an indifferent subject.

Bryan roused himself instantly, and made a valiant effort to respond to the lead thus given to the conversation. But in spite of himself his speech was not so ready, nor his wits so quick, as usual. It was not until he had risen to take leave that his preoccupation seemed to drop away from him, and leave him without a thought except for his host.

"You are settled in town for twelve months, then, at least?" said North.

"I think so," said Bryan. "Yes, I believe there's no doubt of it." He looked at North with his honest eyes full of feeling. "You'll let me see something of you, won't you?" he said. "May I—may I look you up in the evening, sometimes?"

North stretched out his hand warmly.

"We'll meet," he said, "but not at home, Bryan. No

one comes to the house. Come here whenever you like."

The young man coloured scarlet ; he felt that he had blundered, and had not made himself clear.

" Yes," he said confusedly. " I understand, of course, that—that I should see no one but you if I came to your place. But—if I came to see you ? Do you see no one at home ? "

" No one ! " said North quietly.

Startled, he hardly knew why, and almost awe-struck, Bryan Armitage wrung the hand held out to him, and went away.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

It was nearly an hour later when North Branston left the hospital. Twilight had fallen before its time, and, as evening drew on, the gusts of rain had settled into a steady downpour. North's way home was by the Underground Railway, and by the time he reached the station which was his destination it was quite dark. The wind was blowing with piercing sharpness round the corner of the street, as he paused for a moment on the wet pavement, but he hardly seemed to notice it. He opened his umbrella and turned up his trousers mechanically, and strode away through the rain.

Five minutes' brisk walking brought him to his own road. From some of the houses bright lights streamed out, making twinkling reflections in the puddles, and on the fast falling raindrops as they struck up from the pavement. But in the house at which North Branston stopped either the lights within were few, or they were very jealously enclosed by blinds and curtains, for only from the pane of glass over the door did any light come forth into the night. North went rapidly through the gate and up the steps. He let himself in with a latchkey, and closed the door behind him.

The hall in which he stood, with the staircase beyond, and the dining-room half visible through an open door, were those of a commonplace, comfortable house, furnished well, but after most uninteresting fashion. The

most conspicuous characteristic about it was the intense stillness that prevailed. A heavy silence brooded everywhere. There was a dead oppression about the atmosphere, a total absence of all life and movement, which gave to the house a curious effect of being shut off from the outside world.

No suggestion of being affected by his surroundings touched North's face or manner as he drew off his great-coat. He was accustomed to them. He hesitated a moment, and then he went slowly upstairs. He opened a door on the first landing and paused.

The room was a drawing-room, and it was in semi-darkness. Dark curtains had been drawn across the windows, the fire had died low in the grate, and the only light came from a small reading-lamp. The green shaded flame seemed to cast rather shadow than radiance, and in the sombre quiet which reigned here yet more intensely than it did elsewhere, the appearance of the room was indescribably gloomy. Lying on the sofa at the end of the room farthest from the door was Mrs. Vallotson.

She did not stir as the door opened. The lamp was close beside her, its rays fell full on her face, and North saw as he stood on the threshold, that she was asleep. The grave preoccupation of his face seemed to flash as though his thoughts had suddenly and unexpectedly been met half-way. He closed the door noiselessly, crossed the room with quick, quiet steps, and stood looking down at her intently.

Set and sullen, even in unconsciousness, with bitter compressed lines about the mouth, with that indefinable coarseness pervading every line, with stubborn rebellion stamped on every feature, the face that lay there in the light of the lamp was the face of the desperate woman who had confronted North Branston six months ago,

hardened by every long day that had come and gone since then. No touch of perceptiveness, no touch of remorse, no touch of gentleness had fallen on those strong, harsh lines. But it was not with any mental characteristics written on her face that the eyes that watched her now were busy. A great and striking physical change had come upon Mrs. Vallotson during those same six months. The powerfully made figure, once so firm and matronly, had grown gaunt ; even the hands, curiously rigid in her sleep, had an appearance of being all bone. Her face was sunken, and there was a pinched look about it which made her look twenty years older than her real age. Her colour was quite gone, and there was a singular grey look even about her lips.

She was sleeping very heavily—strangely heavily considering the light upon her face, considering also the close scrutiny which she was undergoing. The position was not the easy position most natural in sleep, there was something stiff and constrained about it, as though it had been adopted deliberately as affording some sort of unusual relief. And about her face there was a suggestion of physical exhaustion, such as might be produced by long-continued sleeplessness, or ceaseless pain.

North studied her face, glanced keenly at her position, and then stooped cautiously and listened to her breathing. At last he turned away, and went quietly out of the room, leaving her still sleeping.

An hour later the sound of the gong echoed through the quiet house, and North came into the drawing-room again. It was lighted up this time, but the cheerlessness of its appearance seemed to be rather accentuated than dissipated. It was empty when he entered ; but a moment later there was a slow step on the stairs, and Mrs. Vallotson appeared.

Hard as her face had been in sleep, the contrast—now that she was awake—between its total immobility and the sombre fire that brooded in her sunken eyes, gave it the appearance of a mask cut in stone. No colour had come to her, and her lips were compressed. She wore a morning dress of heavy serge.

She made no answer, as North, coming towards her, wished her a quiet good evening; and he waited, as though her silence were a matter of course, while she preceded him out of the room and down to the dining-room.

Every morning and every evening did the mother and son sit facing one another on either side of the table; and as was the intercourse that now ensued, so was the intercourse between them from day to day. North talked, not plentifully, but with a grave, courteous perseverance which would not recognize the silence which met it. His manner to his mother was gentle and considerate; and both these qualities were rendered the more striking by the restraint which held back even his care for her from forcing itself upon her notice. He spoke entirely of impersonal matters; of such news as was to be found in the evening paper; of the weather, and so forth. He did not mention Bryan Armitage. He asked her no question of any kind.

Such replies as were absolutely necessary, if his speech was to have even the semblance of conversation, came from Mrs. Vallotson, monosyllabic, and indifferent. Her voice had acquired the peculiarly monotonous tone of a person who seldom speaks. She never originated a remark; she never looked at him. She sat for the most part with her eyes fixed steadily on her plate. The woman with whom household management had been a passion took not the faintest notice, now, either of the servants or of the dinner provided. The meal being over

and dessert placed upon the table, she rose, and passed out of the room as silently as she had entered it.

North, having risen to open the door for her, did not return to his seat when he was alone. He walked up to the fireplace and stood there gazing down into the hot coals, reflecting, as it seemed, anxiously and uncertainly.

The subject of his cogitations was one which had been the background of all his thoughts for many days, and those few minutes during which he had watched his mother's sleep had brought it to a crisis. He moved abruptly at last, and went upstairs.

Mrs. Vallotson was sitting on a stiff, uncomfortable chair near the lamp. She had some needlework in her hand ; needlework which, though North's masculine eyes were unaware of the fact, never advanced ; and she did not lift her eyes as he entered the room. He sat down near her ; but he did not, as he was wont to do, take up the paper which lay near his hand. As though he desired to arrest her attention, he fixed his eyes on her face with a deliberate directness of gaze which he usually avoided with her. Mrs. Vallotson's eyes, however, were fastened to her work, and her fingers went on moving slowly and mechanically. And after a moment North spoke.

"Mother," he said, "do you not think it would be well for you to see a doctor ?"

It was on very rare occasions only that he addressed her by the title which it was his right to give her. On his first word Mrs. Vallotson started and lifted her head, facing him with a fierce defiance and repulsion struggling with the rigidity of her expression. He spoke slowly, like a man who has weighed his words well, and as he finished a slight shock passed across her face. She looked at him for a moment in silence.

"No," she said sullenly. "Why should I ?"

"Because you are not well," he said quietly.

A painful, half furtive consciousness, suppressed and thrust down, rose in her eyes ; and her voice, as she answered, grated harshly,—

"I don't know what you mean."

"I think you do," he said steadily. He was keenly observant of her. "You are in pain at this moment ; you are in constant pain. I do not propose that you should let me treat you. But I should like you to see a friend of mine." He paused a moment, and then added very gravely and gently : "I should not suggest it if I did not think it—necessary."

She did not speak at once. The grey hue about her mouth deepened by a shade, and gradually there grew about her face something which gave it a singular, coarse dignity. She took up her work again mechanically.

"Very well," she said.

"Will you see him to-morrow ?"

"When you please."

"At what time ?"

"I am always at home."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THERE was a dead silence in the room. It was North's room in the hospital, and the early afternoon sunshine was streaming in ; it was only forty-eight hours since the cold, wet day which had seen Bryan Armitage in the same room, but the weather had changed as completely in that short interval as though a month of spring had intervened. Standing on the hearthrug with his back to the unnecessary little fire and his hands behind him, was an elderly man with iron-grey hair ; he was one of North's colleagues on the staff of the hospital, and his deeply-lined, rather stern face was turned with an air of keen observation upon the only other occupant of the room, North Branston himself, who stood by the window gazing out into the sunshine.

The elder man did not speak ; apparently he respected his companion's rather pronounced stillness. And after a moment North turned slowly towards him. His face was rather white and rigidly controlled.

"I am not surprised," he said. "I have suspected something of what you say for some time." He paused, and then added in a low, restrained voice : "Has she any suspicion herself? Was she alarmed?"

The other man cast a quick, shrewd glance at him.

"It is difficult to say," he returned. "Mrs. Vallotson is a lady of extraordinary reserve, and, I should say, of considerable fortitude. Some idea as to the direction in which her symptoms point she must have, however, I

imagine ; though of course it is not likely that she guesses the extent of the mischief."

"What did you tell her ?"

"She asked me no questions."

There was another silence, and then North said slowly,—

"If it is as you think at present, there is nothing to be done."

"Nothing effective," asserted the elder man. "Of the main fact, as I told you, there is no doubt. As to the possibility of treatment and so forth I shall be able to judge better when I have seen her again. But, of course, cure is out of the question."

"How far has it gone ?"

A few brief technical sentences came from the other man.

"If we can operate," he concluded gravely, "she may live a year, or even longer. If not——"

He finished his sentence with a slight expressive movement of his shoulders.

A moment or two elapsed before North spoke.

"When do you see her again ?" he said.

"In a week," was the reply. The elder man added a few technical details as to the reasons which had determined the length of the interval, and as he finished, North came forward into the room.

"Thank you, Grant," he said. "It is very good of you to undertake the case for me."

Dr. Grant knew something, though not all, of his colleague's story, and he looked rather curiously at the speaker.

"Not at all," he said. "I am only sorry to have had to tell you this, Branston." He held out his hand with an impulse of cordiality by no means usual with him, and then said hurriedly : "Shall we go down now ?"

The wards were visited ; the regular hospital routine, which had been awaiting the appearance of the two doctors, was gone through ; and then North Branston ascended the stone staircase once more, and entered his own room alone. He flung himself into his arm-chair and leaned forward, gazing straight before him.

He was not surprised. His keen professional eyes had observed his mother too closely and too long to allow of much room for doubt in his mind as to what, in broad outline, would be the result of the medical interview which he had urged upon her. He had suspected for some time past that she was very ill ; and his doctor's mind was too intimately acquainted with the slight dividing line which separates, in such disease as that from which he believed her to be suffering, the grave from the fatal, to render the development of his suspicions in the least strange to him. But though the sentence pronounced found him by no means unprepared, it came upon him as a shock which shook him through and through.

She was to die. The slow, sullen rebellion of her life was to be cut off. The long course of blind, stubborn wrong was to cease. The bitter steps of her life's journey were drawing to an end.

The educating processes of this life are, for the most part, slow and still. A moral earthquake may prepare the mind, but it is in the heavy, laborious quiet that follows that are instilled, letter by letter, the truths of which the earthquake was the herald. The process goes on silently, unhastily, and the stunned creature, living and enduring from day to day, is hardly conscious that he is learning anything. Then, in that same routine there comes a check ; something occurs to change the current of life. The stunned condition from which he has all this time been slowly emerging, drops from him suddenly, and some sense—faint or uncertain it may be,

but inalienable—of the truth as yet but half spelt out dawns upon him.

Through some such process as this North Branston had passed during the past six months, and with the death sentence to which he had just listened there had come upon him that complete clearance of the senses which is the condition of final comprehension. Day by day as he trod the path that stretched before him over the ruins of what might have been ; day by day as that exaltation which is born of great crises died out ; as loneliness grew into his life, as the strain of that only intercourse vouchsafed him, pressed with ever increasing weight upon him ; he had been waking from that quiescence which had bowed his head before an inexorable presence, featureless and without name. As day after day brought its relentless claim upon that finer nature in him, released and given play for the first time ; each with its pitiless demand upon his mercy, his endurance, his patience, he had been learning, learning in all unconsciousness, the first syllables of that lesson which alone could unveil for him that presence and reveal the meaning of the sword it bore.

And as charity—that supreme sense of a common nature flowing from a common source—is the perfect flower of that lesson, so, even in his first faltering and unconscious spelling out of it, there had risen in North Branston a great pity and tenderness for that fellow-scholar who would not—who could not—learn. Centre of his life still, his mother was at once his educator and that which his growing knowledge illumined. Watching the slow torture of her strife with fate, her blind incomprehension, her unyielding defiance, the tragedy of her life had disengaged itself from the tragedy of his own, until it stood out sharp and distinct against the black background of sin, and cried for a solution. Even her

hatred of himself became to him only another element in that tragedy. She was his mother. Out of the constant forbearance of his intercourse with her ; out of his position as her sole dependence ; above all, out of that pity for her which grew in him ; dawned a strange sense of the mysterious meaning the words contained. She was his mother. Love between them could never be. But something he might have given her, if she would have received anything at his hands ; something that might have held for both of them some touch of balm.

And now she was to die. He sat there staring blankly before him, and all the meaning of the words came home to him. She was to die. The hand that had smitten once, that had forced the cup of retribution to her rebellious lips, was raised to strike again, and this time on the blow would follow silence. Without volition on her own part her life had been crushed ; without volition on her own part it was to be withdrawn. She was to die, and death for North Branston meant annihilation. Was that indeed the sole solution of the tragedy ? Was that indeed the end ?

To all the processes which he could follow, at least, it brought cessation. The fierce unconquerable heart was to be stilled ; the working brain was to return to the elements of which it was composed. It was the physical finality beyond which North Branston had not looked for years ; the boundary line at which he had deliberately elected to stop. And thus brought face to face with it, the question rose in him clear and distinct—to what purpose had been all this agony ? To what end had been lived this life, which, as the shadow of conclusion rolled down upon it, seemed to be lighted up for him with a ghastly distinctness. And as he asked himself the question, the power which had risen before him six months earlier to dominate and stun him, rose before

his cleared and steadier perception, and challenged him to name it.

The two questions—the question which he asked of death, and the question wrung from him by life—were indissolubly knit together. If that physical life, drawing now to an inexorable end, was indeed all ; if that blind, impervious spirit was to be quenched thus at random ; if the pitiless discipline of life had no meaning and no intention beyond itself, then the force that dominated humanity was a mechanical force, a power neither of good nor evil, purposeless, meaningless. If, on the other hand, that power was sentient; if behind its dealings with mankind there was a living will, a changeless intention, an unfathomable beauty, then those processes, seen here so incomplete and objectless, must have an object beyond the ken of the materialist, must reach completion in another life than this.

The proposition was formulated in North Branston's mind clear-cut and distinct, and he faced it steadily and deliberately. Sudden revolutions of belief are not common with men ; with men of North's type they are perhaps impossible. The changed faith lies in a man's mind, looked at still as a mere possibility long after it has become conviction. Even as he sat there, absorbed in every fibre by the question before him, its answer lay within him, strong and silent, waiting until the unhurrying processes of time should bring it recognition.

More than an hour passed and he had not moved. At last a sigh parted his lips. He let his hands fall forward over his knees as he lifted his head, pausing a moment, as though his mind were only gradually coming back from the depths in which it had been wandering. Then he rose, pushing back the grey hair from his forehead, and looking about him rather uncertainly. He glanced at the clock. It was nearly five, and with an instinctive

desire for air and exercise he determined to walk home.

It was a lovely afternoon. The sun was setting, but the air was still soft, and even in the City there was a breeze. North Branston, threading his way with regular, even stride along the crowded pavement, lifted his head with unconscious satisfaction to meet it. Coming eventually to Piccadilly, and finding himself on the more frequented north side, he prepared to cross to where the Green Park stretched away, quiet and lovely, with its first faint veil of green touched by the sunset light. He was just turning towards the road when the door of a shop on his right hand opened suddenly, and a lady came rapidly out, turning in the opposite direction to that in which North was walking, thus directly meeting him. For the first time for six months ; for the first time since he had left her unconscious in her own drawing-room ; he was face to face with Eve Karlake.

Eve Karlake, or Eve Karlake's ghost ? The features were sharpened and haggard ; the colouring had faded to a dead level of pallor varied only by the dark shadows that lay beneath the eyes ; and the eyes themselves burned with an unquenchable fire of misery and rebellion. Every line of her face told of pain ; of pain known for the first time ; of pain as a tyrant, resented, cried out against, and inexorable.

They were close together. There was nothing remarkable about a man and a woman meeting on the pavement in Piccadilly ; and on either side of them the passers-by went on their way unheeding. The recognition had been simultaneous on either side, and for a long moment the eyes of each were fastened on the other's face. Then North Branston recovered himself ; recovered, that is to say, such a rigid self-control as alone was possible. He bowed slightly, and was preparing to pass on. But as

he moved Lady Karslake moved also. She slightly stretched out her hand. It was the slightest possible movement, but there was a swift tensity about it which made it as eloquent as a cry could have been.

"No," she said rapidly. The music of her voice was gone, and it was low and hoarse. "I must speak to you—I must!"

He had stopped instantly.

"Where?" he said. He spoke as though he hoped, by the commonplace query, and all the sordid, commonplace difficulty it suggested, to still the intensity of her feelings.

She glanced about her quickly.

"The Park," she said.

Without another word she turned swiftly towards the road, and without another word he followed her. They passed into the Green Park, and turned down one of its little frequented paths, side by side.

It was very quiet there. The roar of London seemed to subside and grow less with every step they took. The light was waning, and the stillness of coming twilight was creeping over everything. The voices of some children playing on the grass came floating over the evening air, their discordant shrillness softened by distance; but, for the rest, the park was almost empty.

But the silence between them remained unbroken. They walked on mechanically, neither glancing at the other.

At last, with a vague instinct towards lessening for her the strain which was becoming unendurable, North turned and looked at her. Her face was quivering helplessly. They were close to a seat, and he stopped abruptly.

"Sit down!" he said.

There was authority in his voice, and she obeyed him

instinctively. She sank down on the seat, turning away from him as she did so, and letting her face fall forward for an instant on her hands with a swift, expressive movement of self-humiliation.

"I can't," she gasped. "I've longed to say it. It has been killing me—killing me—killing me! And now—I can't!"

North's face worked painfully as he stood beside her, looking down upon her bowed head. His lips moved, but no sound came from between them. A moment passed, and then she lifted her head to him in a passion of self-compulsion.

"I will!" she cried. "I will! What does it matter if it kills me to say it? North, North, forgive me! I loathe myself so! I despise myself so! I can't forget it! I can't get away from it! If I could blot out what I said! If I could ever unsay it! Oh, North, North, North, I would live through it all again—I would bear anything—if I could only wipe those words out of my life!"

She had not raised her voice; she was speaking hardly above her breath; but the intensity of her utterance shook her from head to foot. The pallor of her face had given way, a burning colour flooded her throat and the very roots of her hair. She broke off, choked.

North had listened to her, transfixed and motionless, the original heart-wrung incomprehension of his expression giving way to incredulous protestation and pain. As she paused he drew a step nearer with a low, incoherent ejaculation.

"Eve," he said, "don't speak like that, for God's sake!"

She interrupted him sharply, wildly.

"I've lived like that," she cried, "all these months—all these long, horrible months. Everything has been more unendurable to me because of it. Oh, North, I've

realized what I must have seemed to you. I've realized it, do you understand? And I've thought if you could only know how I hated myself—how it wasn't I who spoke at all, but something bad and dreadful——”

She had risen as she spoke, stretching out two imploring hands. And as her voice faltered and grew faint, all his strength rose in North Branston to comfort and support her. He took the two trembling hands into a firm and gentle hold, and met her eyes with a face on which nothing appeared but reverence and tenderness.

“I do know,” he said. “If it comforts you that I should know it, I have known it all the time.”

“That I was mad?” she reiterated. She was clinging to his hands as though she hardly realized to what she held. “That it was because I loved you so? That I was like people hurt too much, who will say anything, do anything, to get rid of the pain? You know it?”

“I know it,” he said again.

“And you haven't grown to hate me and despise me?”

He did not answer her in words, but he smiled. She looked at him for a moment, and then the strain relaxed. Her lips quivered like a child's; she covered her face with her hands, and sat down suddenly in a passion of silent weeping.

North did not watch her; he realized instinctively that her tears were the tears of unutterable relief, and he turned his face away and let them flow unchecked; while every low sound of her crying cut him to the heart.

Rooted and grounded in that past from which the North Branston of to-day was for ever divided, his love alone had survived that catastrophe which had crushed out all that love's hopes, and in the midst of the new conditions of his mental being it burnt on unquenched, unquenchable. It is not in the supreme moment of

parting that severed lives know their worse pain. It is in the weary days that follow, when the heart must hunger and grow sick with hunger, unsatisfied ; when the weary longing for a look, a word, aches through every sense ; when the sun rises and sets, and brings only the knowledge that it must rise and set for as long as life shall last on a world empty of the one presence desired ; it is then that love passes through the fire to come out conquered or conqueror. Day by day as he worked on uncomplaining, North's heart had been wrung in his yearning for the woman he loved. The thought of her suffering had never left him ; the longing for her presence had haunted him by day and night. In the moment of his renunciation of her the flame of his love had shot up white and strong, consuming all the narrow limits which had closed it in. And in the clearer air which gradually surrounded it, it had only rarefied and grown stronger.

Her weeping ceased at last. He heard her move and lean back against the seat as though worn out. He looked at her uncertainly, and she met his eyes and tried to smile.

"I am better," she said ; her voice was faint and weak, but the sharp note of agony rang in it no longer. "I am very sorry." She paused, and looked away through the shadowy trees that loomed up about them. "I do not loathe myself so much," she said, "but—it makes so little difference !"

He did not speak ; there was nothing he could say. There was another brief silence and then she roused herself.

"We must go directly," she said in a level, monotonous voice. "Tell me what you are doing—where you are living !"

He told her briefly, and then he paused. He hardly understood what instinct dictated his next words.

"I am not alone," he said quietly.

She looked up at him swiftly and understood. Her face crimsoned, and she lifted her hand as if to stop him.

"You hurt me," she said. "Don't."

There was disgust and protest in the last word, and North saw that her brows were drawn together and her lips set. He hesitated for an instant, and then said in a low voice,—

"You can't—forgive?"

"Forgive!"

Into the two syllables there was compressed such an unutterable scorn and negation as no flow of speech could have amplified. Upon that knowledge which had come to North so recently they struck jarring and discordant, and he spoke quickly.

"Try to think gently of her," he said.

"Try to think gently of her!" she repeated; she rose with a swift, impetuous movement. "The thought of her is an insult to me—can't you understand? I try—I try with all my heart never to think of her at all. The thought of her existence is a horror to me."

"It will not be for long!"

The words came from him almost in spite of himself, and they arrested her.

"What do you mean?" she said slowly.

He answered her very quietly.

"She has not long to live," he said.

"Is she—ill?"

He spoke two brief sentences, and as she heard them the haughty protest died out of Lady Karlake's face before a flash of womanly horror. She did not speak for a moment.

"That means horrible pain?" She was shuddering a little, and her eyes had dilated.

"Pain or stupefaction—yes," he said heavily.

"Does she know?"

"Not yet."

"Ah, poor thing!"

As the cry escaped her, she forced her lips together and stood motionless, fighting the imagination which was forcing itself upon her almost against her will.

"Is—her daughter with her?" She spoke abruptly, almost fiercely.

"No, she is quite alone."

She did not answer; but she lifted both hands to her head as though the struggle within were physically distressing to her. Then she glanced quickly around her. It was growing almost dark.

"I must go," she said hurriedly. "I must. Oh, I wish—I wish you hadn't told me this." She paused and looked at him. "You have forgiven her!" she said.

"I have not thought of it," he said simply.

She turned away from him sharply.

"You are so strong," she said brokenly. "So strong! Oh, North, North, why must it be? What have we done that we should suffer so? Why were we born if it was only for this? It does no good; it serves no purpose; it leads to nothing."

And then, with the agonized voice of the woman he loved ringing in his ears, the conviction so long latent in North Branston's soul sprang into active life and clothed itself in words. He drew a step nearer to her. His eyes were fastened on her, and in their depths there was a struggling perception, before which all the lines of his face seemed to alter and gain alike in dignity and strength.

"That's our mistake," he said. His voice was very low; it came from between set teeth. "We were not born for this, but for that to which this is to lead. There is a purpose in the life of every man; yes, even of

the most wretched. I think it is because the limits of that purpose are beyond our comprehension, because its depths are vaster than we can plumb, that we ignore it and deny it."

She had grown very still, and as he paused she lifted her head and looked at him, startled, uncomprehending. She did not speak, and he went on again, the glow in his eyes deepening.

"This world is not the end," he said. "That's why its riddle is so hard to read. But I believe there is an answer, and I can wait to know it."

She looked at him for a moment longer, her brows drawn together, her eyes half wild.

"I don't understand," she said. "I don't understand. I only know that we suffer; that we suffer horribly; suffer for sins not ours. I only feel the misery of life and its intolerable injustice."

He took her hands gently into his own.

"We must be patient," he said. "Nothing else will help us. Nothing else will teach us anything."

CHAPTER XL.

THE bright spring weather continued. Day after day the sun shone down from skies whose glorious blue was only enhanced by the soft white clouds that floated leisurely across it. Day after day a mild south wind fanned the astonished world of London. Day after day trees and shrubs burst into fresh loveliness of green.

But to the house which was Mrs. Vallotson's home, sunshine brought no brightness. The spirit of spring seemed to pause on its very threshold, shadowed and chilled ; and within, the sombre quiet brooded undisturbed.

The days of the week that was to intervene between Mrs. Vallotson's first interview with Dr. Grant and his second visit to her, wore out their weary length as the days that had preceded them had done ; but that week, in its passing, seemed to be marked by a darker shade of gloom even than the weeks that had gone before. The routine of life went on as heretofore. North's comings and goings followed one another with their accustomed regularity. Mrs. Vallotson neither came nor went, but remained alone through the long sunny hours of spring as she had remained through the chill dark days of winter, holding communication with no one. The hours passed for her, as far as outward circumstances go, much as they had been wont to do. During the first months of her present life, she had spent long intervals in walking up and down the room in which she happened

to be, her monotonous footsteps making the only audible sound in the quiet house. Gradually, however, she had discontinued the habit. The morning saw her seated in the dining-room erect and still, a piece of needlework in her hand ; with the afternoon she passed to the drawing-room, her occupation unchanged. But during the present week her work made little progress. She would sit for an hour at a time, her needle idle in her hand, her eyes fixed on vacancy, gloomy and absorbed.

It would have been difficult to say, during this week, that there was any definite alteration in her manner ; still more difficult to reduce such alteration to words. And yet some change there was. She seemed to be affected by a restlessness, rendered very painful to watch by the relentless grip in which it was suppressed ; and, as though the effort of suppression strained her nerves almost beyond endurance, the sullen stillness of her demeanour was faintly stirred now and then, in her intercourse with North, by a sudden flash of fierceness.

North saw the change in her and acquiesced in it with a keen pang. The evidences of the depth of her aversion from himself ; the uncontrollable shudder into which his entrance into a room now and then surprised her ; the sharp intolerance that would ring for an instant in her voice ; the glance of unspeakable repulsion ; cut him to the heart, even while he told himself sadly that they revealed to him nothing of which he was not already aware. He understood that such breaches in her self-control were the result of suspense. He understood that suspicions as to her own state had been knocking at the door of her consciousness for weeks past, and that her interview with the doctor had given them admittance. No word on the subject of that interview passed between the mother and son ; not the most distant reference to it passed Mrs. Vallotson's lips ; and

North respected her silence. Until that second visit had been paid, certainty was impossible ; and nothing less than certainty could help her.

More courteous, more considerate than it had been before, it was hardly possible for North's manner to her to become. But it altered slightly. A gentleness which was almost tender, came to it ; a gentleness which sat on his grave demeanour as delicacy of touch sits sometimes on a man's powerful hands.

The week dragged itself away at last. The morning of the day which it had brought dawned bright and sunny like its predecessors. For one moment, as he rose from the cheerless breakfast-table, and turned to leave the still, grey-looking woman alone, North paused. He stood with his hand upon the door, and looked across the room at her, hesitating.

"Grant is to come to you to-day ?" he said.

"Yes."

The monosyllable fell cold ; her face as she answered him softened not by a shade. And North, with his heart aching heavily, could only turn away and leave her.

Two hours passed, and Mrs. Vallotson occupied them as usual, sitting sewing in the dining-room. The mechanical movement of her fingers never ceased. Then the door-bell rang. There was a man's tread in the hall and on the stairs, and the servant opened the dining-room door.

"Dr. Grant is in the drawing-room, ma'am," she said.

"Very well."

The woman withdrew, and Mrs. Vallotson rose deliberately.

For a moment her face twitched slightly. Then she went upstairs.

More than half an hour passed before the drawing-room

bell rang, and the doctor came downstairs again, a slight pucker on his lined forehead. And when he had left the house, Mrs. Vallotson did not return to the dining-room and her needlework. She remained alone in the drawing-room, with the door fast closed, and the stillness over the house was as the stillness of death.

The luncheon bell sounded at last, and it was followed by so long a pause, that the servant was wondering whether Mrs. Vallotson had heard it, and questioning whether or no she should go upstairs to her, when the drawing-room door opened, and slowly, with something difficult and halting about her step, though her carriage was as erect as ever, Mrs. Vallotson came down. Her face was drawn, and in her eyes lurked a sombre fire to be wholly defined neither as horror nor defiance, though it partook of both those characteristics.

Her solitary lunch was rarely more than a form, and to-day it was gone through with exactly as usual. When it was over she rose and went, with the same slow step, back to the drawing-room. And silence fell once more upon the house.

An hour later the front-door bell rang again. It was a sound seldom heard, and the careless wonder with which the servant obeyed the summons was quickened into curiosity when she saw a carriage standing before the door, and on the step a lady.

"Is Mrs. Vallotson at home?"

The clear, rather peremptory voice vibrated strangely; and the woman, influenced instantly by that subtle something which innate refinement and the habit of command never fail to create, hesitated, and scanned the speaker with furtive respect.

"Mrs. Vallotson is in, ma'am," she said uncertainly, "But she—I don't think she receives visitors, if you'll excuse me."

"I have come to see her," was the answer, and with a quick, nervous grace of movement, before which the servant instinctively fell back, Mrs. Vallotson's visitor passed into the hall.

It was Lady Karslake.

From that meeting with North Branston—that meeting for which she had hungered and yearned for six long months—Eve Karslake had come forth haunted.

Her pain, and her passionate intolerance of that pain, remained—or so she thought—untouched. She had seen him again. She had heard his voice, and looked into his face; and though she told herself drearily that the world was only darker for that moment's light; that to relieve the poignancy of her self-humiliation was to intensify, if it were possible, the weary ache of her love; she had nevertheless brought something from that interview which she had not brought to it. She had come away haunted by the thought, not of her own anguish, not of the man she loved, but of the woman by whom both their lives had been wrecked.

During those last six months, as she had said to North Branston, the barest recollection of Mrs. Vallotson had affected her with a sense of intolerable insult. Before the realization of the hideous relation in which North Branston's mother stood to her, all her womanly pride shrank and quivered as sensitive nerves under the touch of red-hot iron. From the moment when the blow fell upon her to the moment when she met North Branston again, six months later, Mrs. Vallotson's place in the background of her mind had been that of the horrible means by which her life and North's had been brought to ruin. With the pitiful knowledge conveyed to her in the Green Park, Mrs. Vallotson had suddenly presented herself before her mental vision no longer as an abstract and

malignant force, but as a woman ; a woman doomed to suffering and death.

Lady Karlake resented the change at first fiercely. She turned her back upon the too persistent thought. She would not look at it ; she would not own it. But it was not to be put aside. She was a woman to her fingertips. If a woman's passions were easily touched in her, so also were womanhood's best graces. The thought of that lonely life oppressed her day and night. The solitude of the long days, the desolation involved in meeting suffering and death un comforted by womanly sympathy, were an ever-present picture with her.

The quality of mercy blesses him who gives no less than him who takes, and even in those first involuntary movements of her compassion, something of its blessing touched Eve Karlake. Little as she realized it, the burden of her own suffering lessened from the moment when she recognized the suffering of another. Little by little, fiercely struggled against, vague impulses to relieve began to flash across her mind. Impulses only ; the outcome of no conscious principle, no magnanimous reasoning ; but impulses having their rise in a spirit intrinsically capable of that greatest of sacrifices—the yielding up of a just resentment. And such an impulse had driven her at last to Mrs. Vallotson's side.

Her breath was coming short and thick as she stood there in the hall ; and she was trembling very much. Impulses are unreliable things. Though they hold good in themselves, they offer no protection against the assaults of revulsion. They are no barrier against the rush of memories which may render their behests a terror.

"I do not wish you to announce me," she said to the servant ; she was controlling herself—as a very nervous person will sometimes do in moments of great excitement—so absolutely that the woman only thought her

voice a little odd. "If you will show me the room, I will go in alone." She paused a moment and a rush of faint colour flooded her face to leave it instantly whiter than before. "Your master is not at home, I believe?" she said.

"No, ma'am."

"When do you expect him?"

"He usually gets in about half-past six, ma'am."

"Very well. Show me the way, please."

The woman hesitated; but so confident was the command that her uncertainty sank before it. She turned and led the way upstairs. On the first landing she stopped, indicating the drawing-room door.

"This room, ma'am," she said.

She spoke involuntarily in an undertone.

Lady Karslake moved swiftly forward, opened the door, and entered the room, shutting the door quickly behind her as she did so.

The sound of her entrance was followed instantly by a faint rustle at the other end of the room. Mrs. Vallotson was sitting in a large chair facing away from the door, looking straight before her, her figure a little bent as if under the compulsion of a paroxysm of pain. She turned her head sharply as the door opened, though the grip of her fingers on the arm of her chair did not relax.

One of the blinds was drawn down, and the light which fell upon the door, close against which Lady Karslake stood, was dim and uncertain. Mrs. Vallotson's senses seemed to move slowly. For a long moment she remained motionless, not recognizing her visitor; unable even, as it seemed, to resent so unprecedented an intrusion. Then gradually the truth dawned upon her. Her eyes, which had rested on Lady Karslake's face with a dull unmeaning stare, began to live; her hands unclasped themselves slowly and with difficult deliberation, and she rose to her feet.

"What do you want?"

The words fell on the stillness of the room, weighted with a deadly force of defiance. Lady Karlake moved, her face still quivering beneath the rush of conflicting emotions which had swept across it during the pause, and took two or three steps towards the dark figure that confronted her. Then, as she drew nearer to it, she stopped suddenly.

The change that had come to the face into which she looked, since she had seen it last, was so tremendous that it struck her for the moment motionless and speechless. The fearful havoc, mental and physical, to which those gaunt features witnessed, the ravages wrought by bodily pain, the still more obvious and ghastly ravages wrought by passion, came upon her as a shock for which she was utterly unprepared. A wave of pity and horror swept over her, lifting even the impulse which had brought her there on to another and a higher plane.

Her sudden stop, her agitated and tremulous silence, seemed to give the advantage to the strength that faced her. Mrs. Vallotson paused a moment, a cold, personal aversion showing faintly in her eyes. And then she repeated her question.

"What do you want?"

With her fingers catching and holding one another, with her colour coming and going painfully, Lady Karlake answered in a low, uneven voice,—

"I—have come to see you."

"Why?"

"I thought—I hoped——"

"Did you suppose your presence would give me pleasure?"

Every heavy syllable was penetrated with such an unspeakable venom of contempt, as penetrated even through Lady Karlake's agitation. It startled her into self-con-

trol. She paused, and when she spoke again her manner had altered. It was very gentle, but there was a touch of dignity about it.

"Pleasure, perhaps, is a thing of the past for both of us," she said. "But I have hoped that we might lighten one another's pain. Can we not try, at least?"

"No!"

Mrs. Vallotson did not move. She uttered the gloomy implacable syllable, and the two stood face to face in silence.

Sharp as had always been the contrast between them, between the woman of innate refinement and the woman of innate vulgarity; between the woman of susceptibilities and the woman of iron; it had never asserted itself as it asserted itself now. They stood there close together, and between them, deeper and more unbridgeable than any gulf of circumstance, lay the gulf of temperament—that saddest of all barriers that separates man from man. Each woman felt it: Mrs. Vallotson with a sullen satisfaction, Lady Karslake with a vague distress that struggled with an equally vague aversion.

It was Lady Karslake who broke the silence, and her sense of the barrier against which she had to work showed itself in an added gentleness and charm of manner.

"Will you not think again?" she said. "You are very much alone. May I not come sometimes and see you? I have heard——" she hesitated a moment—"I have heard that you are not quite well——"

She paused, stopped instinctively by the change, slight enough in itself, which passed across her face into which she looked. It was a very singular change. There was a moment's dead silence, and then Mrs. Vallotson spoke,—

"So you are in the habit of seeing my son?"

There was that in the tone in which the words were uttered, there was that in the very brutality of the insult

they conveyed, that rendered the speech the reckless, instinctive self-relief of a woman in whom the hidden source of the bitterness by which she is consumed is suddenly and unconsciously touched. But Lady Karslake, quivering under the gratuitous cruelty of the speech, was no more capable of reading the motive which had dictated it than if a physical blow had actually stunned her. She faced Mrs. Vallotson for an instant, her eyes dilated with pain and amazement. And then her innate dignity came to her relief.

"I have seen your son once," she said, and she said no more.

A low, crackling laugh broke from Mrs. Vallotson.

"So that is it!" she said. "That is the meaning of the charitable visit. You have agreed to tolerate me—you and he together, I suppose—because I haven't long to live. I am the object of your kind compassion now that I shall not trouble you much longer. Keep your compassion till I ask for it!"

There was a rough power about the last words; there was a rough power about the desperation of her face; the power of a creature which makes its last stand on its own strength. And a low cry broke from Lady Karslake.

"Ah, no!" she said. "No! no!"

With her face working convulsively, hardly conscious, in the outburst of supreme defiance and despair by which her long stillness was shaken, how or where she struck, Mrs. Vallotson turned upon her fiercely.

"I've got to die!" she cried, "I know that well enough. But I can die without your help or his! And when I'm dead you won't get rid of me, remember that. Don't count too much upon my death. It will do nothing for you! Nothing!"

"Ah, don't!" cried Lady Karslake sharply. "Don't talk like that! Don't think like that! I'll go."

Trembling in every limb, and pale as death, she hurried out of the room, down the stairs, and out of the house to her carriage. The front door shut behind her with a heavy thud, and as the sound died away, for the second time that day a stillness fell upon the house which was as the stillness of death.

CHAPTER XLI.

THREE days had passed.

The dreary dinner was over ; Mrs. Vallotson had left the dining-room, and North was alone. He was sitting in his place at the table, his head propped on his clenched hand. His eyes, full of a sombre sense of necessity, stared down at the cloth ; his mouth was grimly set, but his whole face was pervaded by an indescribable pale reluctance. He roused himself abruptly at last ; he went with firm, rapid steps out of the room and up to the drawing-room.

Mrs. Vallotson was there, seated in her usual chair, but she was quite unoccupied. As the door opened she started slightly, but with a nervousness which was not like her, turning her face towards it as if involuntarily.

There was a rather singular, stupefied look upon it ; a look which North had noticed for the first time on his return home in the evening three days before. A dull bewilderment seemed to look for an instant out of the gloomy eyes, only to evade his gaze as he tried to fix it.

The bitterness of the features was in no wise softened, but something of numbness seemed to be creeping over them. He had tried in vain during the past three days to define or account for the change in her ; a change which he seemed to detect even in the odd, far-away voice in which the few words she had uttered in the course of those days had been spoken. And he had put his impressions away from him, telling himself sadly that

they were born of his own painful knowledge of what was as yet unknown to her.

He sat down beside her now, as he had done on the evening when he had suggested her first interview with Dr. Grant, and paused. He hardly knew what impulse dictated his first words.

"Are you in pain this evening?" he said gently.

She moved uneasily and shook her head, turning her face away from him.

"No," she said.

The word was not true. She was always in more or less pain, and he knew it well. A sharp sigh parted his lips, and then his face grew very strong.

"Grant tells me," he said, "that you ask him no questions."

He spoke slowly and deliberately, and paused, tacitly exacting an answer from her. She was passing the open palm of her hand up and down on the arm of her chair with a regular, monotonous motion.

"Have you seen him?" she said at last.

There was a muffled sound about her voice.

"I saw him yesterday," he returned. "He tells me also," he went on, "that he thinks you are not without suspicion as to the gravity of your symptoms."

Then there was another dead silence. There was something braced and set about the gaunt figure, and the movement of her hand alone went on unceasingly. At last it stopped. Her fingers clenched themselves slowly round the arm of the chair, and she turned her face towards him.

"What is it?"

For an instant he scanned her face keenly, and then he answered her. He spoke one sentence only in a low, steady voice.

A short shudder ran through her frame; her features

seemed to contract, and then she was quite still, gazing straight before her. It seemed to North, watching that resolute acceptance of an awful sentence, a long time before she spoke ; in reality it was, as he knew, not more than a moment or two.

“That means—death ! ”

The words, low and brooding, were a statement rather than a question, and North's voice as he began to answer her was a little hoarse. He cleared it determinedly as he proceeded.

“It is not wholly curable,” he said. “I cannot tell you that it is. Grant is of opinion, however, that something may be done by which its progress may be arrested.”

“Is it very far advanced ? ”

She asked the question quickly, but her voice was quite firm.

“Yes,” said North ; his innate reserve and his professional habit of self-control had never served him in better stead. “It is necessary that you should know that the utmost to be hoped from the measures Grant proposes to take would be the prolonging of your life for a few years. But on the other hand, if no such steps are taken——”

“How long shall I live ? ”

The words, heavy and slow, broke in upon his sentence, and North was forced to pause a moment before he answered them.

“In Grant's opinion you may live two months,” he said, “possibly not so long.”

He paused, watching her with heart-sick anxiety. He saw a sharp spasm of emotion pass across her face, and he said quickly and with recovered steadiness of tone,—

“Therefore it is obviously advisable that the operation should be performed, and that without delay. It would not be right to conceal from you that there is a certain

amount of risk connected with it, but, in face of the alternative, Grant advises strongly that that risk should be met."

"I will not have it done."

There was such a dead level of composure in her tone that for an instant North doubted whether he could have heard her aright. He looked at her uncertainly. Her eyes were fixed on space, sombre and musing.

"You don't quite understand, I am afraid," he said very gently. "It is necessary. It offers you your only chance of life."

"I will not have it done ! "

Not a tone, not an inflection was altered, and as the reiteration fell upon North's ears he moved uneasily. He leaned suddenly forward in his chair and began to speak with greater urgency.

"Why not ? " he said. "Do you not rely on Grant's opinion ? You can hardly have a better man, but if you would prefer further advice you can see anyone you like. Is it the thought of the risk from which you shrink ? It is a risk, I allow. But if it succeeds, you have many months of comparative health before you ; and if it fails—you have nothing to lose."

He stopped, waiting anxiously for her answer. But Mrs. Vallotson neither moved nor spoke. It was not the silence of reflection ; it was not the silence of a woman who finds her intentions shaken by the arguments addressed to her. It was the silence of absolute resolution, and it impressed itself as such upon North. His face and manner grew keenly disturbed as he watched her, and he began to speak again, reasoning with her, at once with the greatest gentleness and a strong insistence.

"Will you not give me your reasons," he said, "and let me explain them away ? Or would you prefer to see Grant about it ? Believe me, he would not advise this

step if he were not absolutely convinced of its necessity. He is trustworthiness itself, and he is by no means prone to such measures. I should not urge it on you if I were not certain that it is the right thing to do. And I do urge it most earnestly. To refuse, or even"—he paused and went on very slowly and deliberately—"to delay your consent is to refuse the one hope of reprieve held out to you, to condemn yourself to certain death."

"I will not have it done."

He might have as effectually addressed a woman made of stone. The iron determination of her face had not altered by a shade; the monotonous level of her voice was quite unchanged. Against the set resolution which she seemed to personify, argument was thrown away.

For a moment North hesitated, his eyes glowing, his face working. A vague instinct towards entreaty stirred him. But there was that about the atmosphere which surrounded them, mother and son as they were, through which entreaty could not pass. He rose abruptly and turned away, and there was a long silence.

It was North who broke it. He lifted his head slowly from his hands, on which it had been propped as he leaned against the mantelpiece and turned towards her. His face was drawn and white.

"I cannot press the matter further," he said. "Professionally, of course, it is only possible under the circumstances to place the matter before you, to advise you and—to leave the decision in your hands. Grant shall know what you say."

He paused. He had not studied human nature, as every doctor must, for so many years without realizing to the full the power exercised by indirect influences where direct argument has failed; and even as he accepted his defeat, keenly aware in his inmost con-

sciousness of the hopelessness of the position, the instinct to try such side influences moved him in spite of himself. He waited a moment to recover his self-control, and then he spoke again in a grave matter-of-fact tone.

"I think you understand," he said, "that since you refuse, nothing whatever can be done to arrest the rapid progress of the disease. Something—though, I fear, in your case not a great deal—can be done to relieve the severe suffering entailed; and Grant will continue to attend you for that purpose. It will of course be necessary that you should have a nurse, and her presence immediately will be a comfort to you, I think. I will arrange for it to-morrow."

He had spoken uncompromisingly. Reserved as his words were, they were calculated to place before her in all its naked painfulness the prospect which she had to face. Absolutely in the dark as to the reasons which might influence her in her refusal of the proposal which he had made her, he had been guided by an indefinite notion that she might possibly be moved by a detailed realization of the alternative which she was choosing. Her answer came upon him as an indescribable shock.

Mrs. Vallotson turned to him for the first time, and looked steadily into his face.

"I will not have a nurse," she said. "And I will not see Dr. Grant again."

A quick flash of incredulous dismay passed across North's face. Then he said gently and patiently,—

"The nurse can wait, if you prefer it. But I think—I fear—that before many days you will find such care a necessity. As to Grant—do you mean that you would rather I attended you?"

She made a swift peremptory gesture of negation.

"I will not be attended at all," she said.

He smiled a slight, sad smile.

"I am afraid you will find it inevitable."

"Why?" she returned, an old recklessness touching the stillness of her manner. "Nothing can be done—you have just said so."

"Not quite," he answered gravely. "I said that a certain amount of suffering might be spared you."

"I do not wish to be spared."

"Ah!" he said, and there was a sharp note of agonized prescience in his voice. "You don't know what you are saying."

She looked straight up at him, her eyes sombre and unflinching, with something strange and indefinable hidden in their depths as she gazed at him for a moment in silence; there was a slight touch of scorn about her mouth.

"Do you think I am a coward?" she said.

Rough as was its manifestation, almost coarse as was its defiance of all assistance, there was something in the unyielding front, which thus faced certain agony and death, which touched North Branston to the quick. He looked into the resolute face, haggard already with pain, and his sense of the atmosphere about them faded away; he felt nothing, he realized nothing but the rush of unspeakable compassion.

He drew suddenly close to her, and his words came quick and suppressed with the intensity of his entreaty.

"Mother," he said, "think again! Let us do what we can, all that skill and care may do. Consent, I beg of you."

She had startled violently as his first word fell on her ear; and as he spoke she had let herself sink slowly back in her chair, her hands clenched, her face working painfully for the first time, as she stared up at him. She did not answer him immediately.

"Why should you care?" she muttered at last.

"Why should I care?" he echoed; his low voice vibrated strangely. "I am your son! Own me by letting me help you. Own me by trusting me. Own me by taking at my hands a little ease—a little longer life."

She was trembling from head to foot now. She tried to rise, but her shaking limbs refused to obey her.

"Life!" she said hoarsely. "Why should I want life? What's the good of life to me?"

"Might we not learn in it," he said, "to know each other better?"

"What then?" she answered. She had staggered to her feet, and stood holding to a chair to keep herself erect; her voice caught, and grated with a strange desperation. "What help is there in that? What help is there in anything?" She stopped abruptly, and then added in a low, brooding tone: "Not even my death will do any good. Not even my death! It will go on and on."

Before he could speak, before he could master the indescribable amazement stirred in him by the vaguely understood drift of her words, she had turned and made her way with stumbling, uncertain steps, and catching at the furniture for support, out of the room.

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CHAPTER XLII.

BEATEN at all points, with all things converging towards the inevitable close, with all things falling back to leave the soul alone with the eternal mysteries of inexorable compulsion ; those vague movements of the spirit, which the tremendous contact rarely fails to create, had become a part of the grim discipline which originally engendered them, and were to do their work unrecognized except as grinding pain. Fought against, rebelled against, denied, something had laid its chill touch upon Mrs. Vallotson ; something too blind and groping, almost, to be called remorse. Face to face with death, that silent conqueror before whom no rebellion avails anything, she had begun to brood over the past. Orthodox and strict as she had always been in the conventional observances which represented her religion, spiritual perception was absolutely dormant in her. Right and wrong had been convertible terms, with her, with respectable and non-respectable. Just comprehension of what she had done ; of the long chain of sin and consequence wound out in the tragedy of which she was the centre, was not for her. But gradually the past began to assume for her the proportions of a black mistake. It haunted her ; it weighed her down ; she could not escape from it. Writhe under it as she might, thrust it from her fiercely as she did during those long months of his unflinching patience and gentleness, the thought of North had been eating into her life, Something of the wrong she had

done him began to shape itself before her ; to grow into more definite proportions as her own state grew clearer and clearer to her. Her fierce reception of Lady Karslake had been her last stand against her consciousness. Strong and unbending even in defeat, she had become, during the three days that followed, its helpless prisoner.

Walled in and dominated, conquered physically and mentally, life had become unendurable to her. The gift of a few months more was one to be hurled back upon the giver. She was to die ; and she would die as she had lived, deliberately and of her own will.

What impulse, or what mixture of impulses, had dictated to her the resolution of accepting no relief in the inevitable suffering that must lie between her and the end ; whether it had its origin in that stubborn pride which had guided her through life, or whether she set herself to endure, nerved and fortified by some strange half-heathen instinct towards expiation ; it would be hard to say. The woman herself, as fortitude became the hourly habit of her life, could not have told. But from that resolution she never swerved. After that scene with North no word as to her state crossed her lips. Deliberately, and of set purpose, she had shut down an iron barrier between herself and all human help ; and on the other side of that barrier her son stood helpless.

What agony of mind the weeks that followed held for North, no one but himself ever knew. Watching her as the days crawled by, the gradual development of her illness unfolded itself before him with dreadful precision. He knew that she was dying before his eyes. He knew that the ghastly stillness of her demeanour hid such suffering as tortured him to think of. He knew that she could know no respite by day or night. He knew that some sort of relief, that long intervals of oblivion, at least,

lay in his hand to bestow, and that his hand was powerless.

Again and again he protested ; passionately, sternly, entreatingly ; all in vain. Long after her strength was reduced, as he knew, almost to nothingness, she rose and came downstairs, passing from room to room according to her old routine, supported by her unfailing will ; moving, however, only when no one was near to see what the effort cost her. He engaged a nurse, a woman who might have done for her almost as much as he himself could have done. But Mrs. Vallotson would not see her.

North grew haggard and worn. His work became for him a mere mechanical routine haunted by the thought of the gloomy house he had left and of the slow, silent tragedy that was there working itself out. When he was away from her he was consumed with anxiety, when he was in her presence the sight of her endurance was almost more than he could bear. Inside the house, or outside, he rarely spoke. At the hospital it was said among his colleagues that "poor Branston " grew more taciturn with every day. He was too reserved a man to have intimate friends ; and, liked and respected as he was, his private griefs could never become public property. There would have been no soul about him at this juncture to whom he could have spoken of that which was weighing on his life had it not been for the presence in London of Bryan Armitage.

Sympathy becomes precious and necessary to a man in proportion as his own capacity for sympathizing develops, and there is no quality so surely refined and quickened by the discipline of suffering as the quality of perception where our fellow-creatures are concerned. The very feature in young Armitage for which North Branston had half despised him, hitherto ; his simple-hearted affectionateness, his honest faith, his quickness of

feeling ; made him now the one companion whose presence was to North anything but a heaviness and a strain. It had taken few words to convey to Bryan how matters lay ; it took no words at all to draw out, day after day, his tacit unobtrusive affection and encouragement. It became a regular custom that he should appear at the hospital for a few moments some time during the day, either in his dinner-hour or just before North left. He never asked any questions ; sometimes he would be full of the merest nonsense. But North never failed, now, to detect what lay behind his boyishness, and to respond to it with a half unconscious gratitude.

Five long, slow weeks had dragged themselves away, and it was a close, wet afternoon in May when Bryan, going as usual to North's room at about six o'clock, found North standing at his table putting away some papers.

"Ah, Bryan," he said, "I thought I should have missed you."

"Am I late ?" asked Bryan cheerily. "I don't think so."

North glanced at the clock.

"Perhaps not," he said in a low voice. "I am leaving a little earlier, I suppose."

There was a moment's pause, and then Bryan said,—

"Are you more anxious than usual ?"

North threw himself heavily into the chair by which he stood, clenching and unclenching one hand nervously.

"I don't know what I am," he said in an odd, hoarse voice. "I can see nothing but her face, Bryan ! Her face as it looked this morning."

"Is she worse ?"

"Yes !" he answered sharply. "It's drawing to the

end, boy, it's drawing to the end ; and she won't let me touch her. She tried to get up from her chair last night, and couldn't do it. She tried again, and couldn't do it. There were great drops standing on her forehead. I put out my hand to help her. She pushed it away and compelled herself. Good Heaven ! ”

Quite suddenly, broken at last by the remembrance of a scene through which he had passed rigidly composed, North Branston's self-control gave way. His face fell forward upon his arms as they lay upon the table, and a man's suppressed sobs shook him from head to foot. With his face twitching painfully, Bryan turned away.

It did not last long. In two or three moments those heart-rending sounds ceased, and North was very still. Then he raised himself slowly.

“ I beg your pardon, Bryan, boy,” he said. “ That was hard on you ! ”

“ I—hope you won't say that, North,” faltered the young man.

North rose and came towards him.

“ No,” he said in a low, moved voice, “ I won't, Bryan ! I'll say—thank you. What should I do without you ? ”

There was a silent hand-clasp, and then North turned away abruptly, and began to finish the task on which he had been occupied on Bryan's arrival.

“ Are you going to walk to the station with me ? ” he said, resuming his ordinary manner. Then, as he saw that Bryan was hardly ready to speak, he added : “ It's a wretched evening.”

It had ceased to rain, however, by the time North reached home. He paused a moment on the doorstep and looked up at the slowly clearing sky, a steady strength of endurance deepening in his eyes. Then he went in. He went straight upstairs. It had become his

habit to see his mother always as soon as he came in, and then to leave her undisturbed till dinner-time.

It was growing dark on the staircase, and as he opened the drawing-room door the red glow of the evening sky, shining in through the window directly facing him, dazzled him for the moment. Then, with a sudden flash, his vision seemed to go clear again, and he took in his surroundings at a glance. Everything in the room was just as usual ; the chairs and tables were set about in their stiff, unused array. But the figure which had held itself so stubbornly erect was beaten down at last. In the centre of the room, a few paces from the chair which she was wont to occupy, his mother lay face downwards on the floor.

The movement of the mind in any moment of supreme crisis is not to be explained, hardly to be defined. In the very moment of realization all North Branstons being rose up in one passion of agonized yearning that he might not find her dead ; that she might not have passed away for ever in the utter loneliness to which she had condemned herself. It was not an instant before he was kneeling by her side, but in that instant he seemed to live again through all the years of his life in one unspeakable pang.

She was not dead. His quick professional perception told him so even before he touched her. But as he laid his fingers on her pulse and looked into her ghastly face, oblivious in its blank unconsciousness who lifted it, and on whose arm it lay, he knew that the struggle was over, and that her body would obey her indomitable will never again. She was conquered to the uttermost. They might do for her what they would and she could lift no finger to prevent them.

They did what little might be done—North and the nurse—all that should have been done so long ago.

Night drew on and the deathlike stupor was still unbroken. The nurse had left the room, and North, standing by the bedside, was gazing down at the livid features when he saw a faint movement pass over them. He laid his fingers quickly on the wrist lying on the counterpane, not knowing that it might not be the end ; and as he watched, he saw her eyes slowly open. She could not move ; she was too weak even to withdraw her wrist from his fingers, if she had wished to do it. That she would accept her utter helplessness was the only thing that might be hoped for. And knowing this and seeing recognition in her face, North spoke to her, his voice low, steady, and professional.

“Do not speak more than one word,” he said, “but try to answer me. Are you in great pain?”

She did not attempt to speak ; she did not even seem to hear his words. Her hand lay heavy and passive in his ; her eyes rested on his face, sullenly, quiescent at last—the eyes of the conquered, but with a strange faint hunger in them. At last her lips moved, and he bent his head to catch the feeble voice,—

“Send for Constance!”

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE midday express from Alnchester to London was tearing steadily across the country. It was a sunny May day, and even the commonplace landscape which stretched away on either side was beautiful with blossom. But there were two passengers by whom, though one of the two never moved her eyes as they gazed fixedly out of the window, the loveliness about them passed absolutely unheeded. Alone in a first-class carriage, facing one another as they sat in the corners, on either side of a window, were Bryan Armitage and Constance Vallotson.

At twelve o'clock on the night before, North had come to Bryan's rooms with a brief account of Mrs. Vallotson's collapse and of her one request ; and with an inquiry, equally brief, as to whether it would be possible to Bryan to go down to Alnchester and fetch Constance. Bryan had made it possible, and at five o'clock in the morning he had left London. He had reached Dr. Vallotson's house at about ten o'clock, and on the two hours that followed he never cared to dwell. Even now, as he sat opposite Constance in the train, he could hardly realize that she was actually with him. He was taking her bodily presence to her mother's side ; so much concession had been wrung from her—and through her from her father—by such strongly worded representation as had never issued from Bryan's lips in all his life before. But her soul, as he knew well,

remained untouched. Bryan's honest face was a trifle colourless and weary. He had had no sleep on the previous night, and he had compressed a double journey into the shortest possible space of time. But far stronger than any trace of physical fatigue, as he glanced now and again at his companion's averted profile, was the pain and anxiety which made him look stronger and more manly by ten years.

The change which the past eight months had wrought in the face so stubbornly turned from him was as great as it was pitiful to see. From Constance's small brown features the girlishness had gone for ever. They were thin, pinched, and sallow. Sharpened and accentuated to the extreme point of their unpleasant possibilities, those traits of expression which had been laughable when softened by the charm of youthfulness stood out now frankly confessed as grave faults of character. The self-confidence had become hard self-assertion. The superiority had become narrow intolerance. The pronounced little chin and nose witnessed to the steady growth of a sour contempt which condemned wholesale. The whole face would have been simply and wholly disagreeable to look at, if it had not been for an indescribable wretchedness that pervaded it, that lurked in the hard dark eyes—terribly like her mother's—and seemed to create their sharpness.

The journey was half over and she had hardly moved or spoken. Bryan had tried to induce her to eat the sandwiches with which he had provided himself for her benefit, only to meet with a monosyllabic refusal. The light was beginning to change from the full radiance of midday to the first suggestion of afternoon shadow; he had been watching her some time in silence when he leaned a little forward in his seat and spoke.

"Connie," he said quickly and diffidently, "do you

think that any fellow-creature stands beyond the pale of our pity ? ”

She turned her head and looked at him for a moment, her faced unmoved and contemptuous.

“ Perhaps not,” she said ; her voice was hard and thin. “ I have not considered the question.”

“ If you had heard your mother's story told of some one with whom you were unconnected, wouldn't you—even if you had thought most of the other people on whom the blow fell—have pitied her a little, too ? ”

“ You are arguing quite unnecessarily,” she returned. “ I do pity my mother. Otherwise I should not be here.”

Her lips set themselves into a firm implacable line as she turned her head deliberately away, as though to close the conversation. But a quick exclamation broke from Bryan.

“ We use the same word, Connie, dear,” he said ; “ but we don't mean the same thing. Pity, as I understand it, means tenderness, sympathy. It means seeing misery when we should otherwise only see wrong-doing ; it means wanting to relieve that misery. It's pity like that that holds as all together. Don't we all need it every day of our lives ? ”

She moved her hand impatiently on her knee.

“ That's a theory,” she said, in a low, sharp tone. “ Theories are quite useless. They have nothing to do with things as they are ! ”

He looked at her for a moment with a vague uncertain light, struggling with the perplexity of distress with which his eyes were full. Ever since they met that morning—meeting after an interval of nearly ten months—he had been seeking blindly and most unhappily for some clue which should bring him in touch with this new Constance, about whom his instinct, only, could

detect any trace of the Constance of old. Only Bryan, who had known her so well and so tenderly perhaps, could have detected the clue afforded by the sweeping assertion to which he had just listened. And only so straightforward a nature could have pursued it with such simple courage.

"It all depends on which one begins with," he said quietly. "If one arranges one's theories from life it's all right enough. But if one develops theories first, and looks to make life square with them——"

"No one would be so foolish as to do that!" she interrupted.

"Not knowingly," he said gently. "Certainly not."

She turned with an irritable movement, and fixed her eyes once more on the country; and Bryan paused to consider his next words. Hardly a moment had passed, however, before she spoke again.

"You think I'm very hard, Bryan? You're quite right, I am. I cannot help it! I don't want to help it! I am not going to argue the point with you! Men are always sentimental about women like my mother! I simply ask you if you suppose I wanted to feel as I do! You know I didn't! You know I stood on higher ground than other girls about such questions. I could reason. Do you suppose it was pleasant to me to be shaken to the most contemptible depth of feeling?"

She had spoken bitterly and passionately, her set manner breaking up with every word as though the contact with her old playfellow influenced her in some subtle way. And as she finished, throwing the question at him fiercely, self-contemptuously, something of the old Constance, the Constance whom he had played with, argued with, and loved ever since he could remember, seemed to lurk in every tumultuous line of the small

pinched face. Bryan flushed hotly, but he spoke very simply and steadily.

"Connie," he said, "that's it ! That's why you don't quite see the rights of things. You could reason, but it's no use to reason unless you can feel too. When feeling seems contemptible to one, one's all wrong. Look here, dear," he went on, speaking very earnestly and with a great effort, "you say you stood on higher ground than other girls ? Now, that's the question ! What is higher ground, and how does one get there ? "

"Knowledge is higher ground," she answered defiantly. "A calm capacity for clear thought, for facing points that are usually ignored. And one gets there, of course, by right of brain power and its proper use."

"You're wrong, Connie," he said. "Look here, I don't like talking to you of things like this, but we must have it out ! Knowledge alone isn't higher ground, and brain power alone will never bring us up to it."

"What will, then ? " she demanded scornfully.

"Sympathy, I think," he said. "The sympathy that comes of trying to do what we ought ourselves and knowing how horribly hard it is. And higher ground is higher insight and experience, that's all ! Don't you see, Con, that even if you had known as much as you thought you did, it wouldn't have given you insight ; phrases and facts can't do that. It's got to grow, gradually, you know."

There was a moment's silence, and then she said dubiously but thoughtfully,—

"Then do you mean that if I had had more—insight—I should have been able to take it more as I should have wished, more calmly ? "

A sharp ejaculation broke from Bryan.

"Good heavens, no ! " he said in a quick, moved voice.

"Connie, can't you see at all what I mean ? Insight

doesn't make one calm in the presence of sin and misery, it only makes one's feeling deeper and tenderer."

"Is that a better thing?"

He leaned forward impulsively and took her hands in his.

"You know it is," he said. "If you could forget all the phrases that made playthings of these things for you before you could realize what they meant, if you could get outside the narrow conceptions you've taken for truth, and let your womanliness have fair play, you wouldn't want me to tell you so."

She turned her face away from him sharply, but she did not withdraw her hands. They were trembling. There was a long silence, and then she said in a strange, uneven voice,—

"Do you mean that she is really dying?"

He had watched her face, and the transition of her ideas was no surprise to him. His fingers closed more firmly round her little shaking hands.

"Yes, dear!"

"And she asked for me?"

"Yes."

She looked round slowly; the small brown features were quivering.

"Bryan," she said tremulously, "I wish—I wish you had come home sooner. I have wanted you very much."

And then—they neither of them quite knew how it happened—they kissed each other for the first time since Connie was ten years old.

The afternoon shadows were growing long as they drove rapidly through the London streets. Constance was very pale and quiet, and her face was eloquent of an awestruck suspense. Bryan, too, was grave and silent; and not a word had passed between them when the cab

finally slackened speed, and Bryan looked quickly up at the windows of the house. He turned to her instantly and said gently,—

“It’s all right!”

Then he helped her out; the door was opened to them almost at the same moment, and Constance caught nervously at his arm.

“Where is North?” she said tremulously. “When shall I have to see North?”

He had never seen her shaken or unnerved before, but it seemed to come quite naturally to Bryan to steady and support her.

“There he is,” he said tenderly, looking along the hall to the top of the staircase. “He is coming down to us now.”

A man’s step sounded on the stairs, and at the same instant North came within sight. Bryan felt the girl start violently, and knew that she was shaking from head to foot. He drew her gently on, and the next moment North had reached them. He held out his hand to Constance with grave kindness.

“I am very glad to see you,” he said in a low voice.

“We are in time?” said Bryan.

“Yes!”

North opened the dining-room door as he spoke the one grave word, and tacitly suggested that Constance should go in. She obeyed him mechanically, but, once inside the room, she turned and spoke in a subdued voice,—

“May I not go up?”

North looked at her white, agitated face.

“You are very tired,” he said. “I would rather that you rested for a little, and had something to eat first.” He paused and added very kindly: “She will not know you, Constance. She is unconscious.”

"But—she will?"

"Yes," he answered, "I hope so."

A meal was waiting for the travellers, and, as if influenced in spite of herself by his manner, Constance tried to follow North's injunction to eat something. She was quite composed, though she was still very pale when, half an hour later, she said hurriedly, but not unsteadily,—

"North—let me see my mother now."

Again he looked at her carefully.

"Are you rested?" he said.

"Yes!"

"You understand that she is quite unconscious?"

"Yes!"

He rose, and Constance followed him without a word out of the room and up the stairs. With his hand on the door of Mrs. Vallotson's room he stopped, and looked round at the girl with a great pity in his eyes.

"Constance," he said, "are you prepared to find her greatly changed?"

She nodded. He saw that she could not speak, and that delay was but a cruel kindness. He opened the door and led the way into the room.

The quiet that had brooded over the house for all those months seemed to be concentrated at last between the four walls of that one room. It was large and square, conventional in its appointments, and adapting itself easily in its bare neatness to the characteristics of a sick-room. The sun had set, no afterglow had caught the windows; and the fading light had a sombre effect. The nurse, whose quiet movement, as she rose on North's entrance, hardly seemed to touch the silence, was seated by the bedside; and on the bed, rigid and motionless, lay the only other figure that the room contained.

North did not hesitate. He led the way straight up to the bedside, and Constance, with her hands clenched tightly together, followed him. North did not look at her. He heard a low, strangled catch of the breath, and then the quiet settled down upon the room again as they stood there side by side, gazing down upon the face of the woman who was the mother of them both.

Was it indeed her mother? Looking at those sunken features, wrapped in their impenetrable insensibility as in a dreadful mask; those features blank and expressionless but for the lines of resolution and endurance graven too deeply ever to be effaced, a sense of unutterable strangeness fell upon Constance. She could not speak, she could not feel; a chill of awe had fallen on her, and all her faculties seemed frozen. At last she became aware that North was speaking to her. She looked up slowly, and knew that he repeated his words.

"She suffers nothing while she is like this," he said very gently. "Come down now. You shall see her again by-and-by."

He laid his hand upon her arm, and drew her out of the room. Glancing at her face as he closed the door, he saw that it was working convulsively; but no sound came from her until, as he opened the dining-room door again, Bryan Armitage started up and came eagerly towards them. And then she broke into a low, bitter cry,—

"Oh, Bryan, my mother! my mother! Oh, Bryan, Bryan!"

The next moment she was clinging to him in a passion of sobs and tears, and North shut the door softly and left them.

Two hours passed before he came downstairs again, and then Bryan met him in the hall. Constance was quite worn out, he said; she would go to bed if

North would promise that she should be called if there should be any sign of consciousness. A little stir succeeded in the house ; and then North, who was to spend the night in the sick-room, acceded to Bryan's urgent entreaties that he would spare himself during the brief interval that yet remained before his watch began ; and the two sat together, silent companions, in the dining-room.

Ten o'clock struck, and North rose.

"Good-night, Bryan," he said. "Go to bed."

"I shall go to sleep whether I go to bed or not," returned the young man ruefully. "Good night, North !"

The servants were moving about below, shutting up the house. As North went up the stairs the quiet, subdued sounds gradually died away ; he heard, as he opened the door of the sick-room, the door of the room in which a bed had been improvised for Bryan Armitage close softly ; and out of the quiet of the night, as it fell upon the house, he passed into a quiet deeper still.

No perceptible change showed itself in the room, except inasmuch as it was lighted now by a lamp so placed that the slightest change in the face of the patient would be visible to the watchers. The figure on the bed lay in the same blank stupor. As North entered the room the nurse was standing by the pillows looking attentively into the unconscious face. She turned as he approached, giving place to him silently and watching him furtively. He studied the face on the pillow quietly for a few seconds, then he asked a few brief technical questions.

His catechism finished, he turned from the patient to the nurse.

"I need not keep you any longer," he said. "You had better go to bed at once."

The woman hesitated, and her eyes wandered to the bed.

"There is a change, sir, don't you think ? "

She spoke diffidently, but it was eloquent of the infinite remoteness of the figure on the bed that neither of the speakers had lowered their voices beyond their natural pitch.

"Yes," answered North quietly.

He said no more, and the woman turned away. At the door she stopped,—

"Good-night, sir ! "

"Good-night ! "

The door opened and shut. He heard her step pass on up the stairs ; he heard the sound of a closing door ; silence descended for the last time that night upon the house.

Alone, in the heart of the silence ; alone with that rigid figure, eloquent alike of the mysteries of life and death ; alone with the tragic centre of his whole life's meaning ; North Branston looked into his mother's face, and read there the beginning of the end.

The change there manifested was very slight. The colour had altered indefinitely, and the lips looked pinched and sunken ; but to the trained eye the indications were distinct enough. Looking down now upon her unbroken stillness, North knew that it was not the insensibility induced by anæsthetics that held her, that it was the final stupor of exhaustion. Absolutely motionless she lay there. She had been a fighter all her life ; strong, bold, and resolute. She had fought against the world, and conquered. She had fought against the hand of God, and fallen. She lay now as the weakest and the strongest creatures upon earth must lie, so touched by the lord of life and death ; and the sands of her life ran slowly out, unheeded of her any more, not to be checked

by any power on earth. Not to be checked ; not to be retarded in their passing. They might move rapidly, they might move slowly ; but the regulation of their movement had passed beyond the reach of human hands. Unhastily, unfalteringly, the work of life tended towards its final consummation—death.

The weeks of preparation seemed to fade away out of North Branston's life ; the world and all it held seemed to recede ; leaving him face to face with that which each moment as it passed was bringing surely nearer. Not that material dissolution alone, with which he was only too familiar ; not death the scientific process, death the man-explained, the man-bélittled ; but death the teacher, death the guide, death the eternal mystery, at once the Alpha and the Omega of life.

The stillness of the room grew deeper. Mechanically, North had seated himself in the chair beside the bed. He sat there motionless, almost, as the figure which he watched. The solemn shadow of that which was to come crept from the face upon the pillow, and rested on the face that watched it. In the moments when the veil of life wears thin, and that which is behind stirs, dimly seen and faintly apprehended, the spirit of man humbles itself and questions not.

She was going ; as surely and as visibly, as though he had seen her bodily form fade into nothingness before his eyes, she was passing away. The severance which no efforts of their own could have accomplished was drawing nearer and nearer ; the severance of two existences condemned to crush each other, and in the process doomed to crush themselves. She was going. The riddle of the blind, rebellious, conquered life was to be solved at last ; but the solution was for her and not for him. She was going.

The night had passed away. The dawn was stealing

slowly into the room when North rose suddenly. For a moment he stood beside the bed, his eyes, deep and intense, fixed upon the face upon the pillow. It was touched now, for the first time, by a slight suggestion of change. Still without moving his eyes, he stretched out his hand and laid his fingers on her wrist. The beat of her pulse had altered. He felt a slight vibration as of movement shiver through her, and then the dead insensibility of her face slowly relaxed. Her eyes opened and looked full into his.

The wings of death beat through the air of life, and the vibrations thus called into being thrill through man with an influence which he may not fathom. In that supreme moment, as the eyes of the mother and son met, the tie between them rose, asserting itself for the first time, as for the last. It looked through the faint cloud of old antipathy in the dull eyes of the dying woman; and it responded solemnly in the eyes of the man who leaned over her. No thought of the daughter she had loved stirred in her; no thought of the sister who should have stood beside him penetrated his consciousness.

"Lift me up!"

Her breath was coming in long, painful gasps, and even as he raised her in his arms a grey pall fell between spirit and spirit as the strong woman's frame made its last struggle for life. She was conscious still, but only dimly. He saw her lips move, and he bent his head to catch the words they uttered,—

" . . . never be altered! It can—never—be altered!"

Her face was changing with a dreadful rapidity. Solemn grey shadows had gathered about her mouth, and for a moment she lay in his arms, long shudders shaking her from head to foot. Then her indomitable

spirit seemed to fight its way back once more through the disabilities that were thronging its course. Her eyes were open, and recognition struggled back into them as she stared up into his face.

"Is it—you?" she said. "I suppose—I ought to say—I——"

She had never asked for pardon in her life, and she did not do it in the moment of death. But on every line of her face—sullen and reluctant even then, but unmistakable—the word was stamped.

And, as North touched her forehead gently with his lips, mother and son parted.

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CHAPTER XLIV.

THE stress and strain of feeling must subside. The wave which carries man beyond the limits of his reason, the wave which sweeps him from the foothold of his human knowledge and bears him onward on the bosom of the illimitable and unfathomable ocean which flows about humanity, has but one moment of perfect flood; and then it must recede again and leave him, stunned, perhaps, and breathless, on the shore of life. If it has raised him to a vantage ground from which the ocean in its majesty is discerned a little clearer; if the remembrance of that measured rush and sweep of many waters lingers in his heart, a solemn music to which his work is henceforth timed; its work is done. Man's place is on the shore until the ocean take him to itself for ever; it is on the shore that his labour waits him.

Quietly and steadily, with no unnecessary words North Branston gathered up the broken threads of his life and bound them into the one strand by which he could go onwards into the future—the strand of work. He stood alone. The one all-dominating tie was broken, but its shadow laid upon his life a sentence of unchanging isolation. No individual hopes or fears, cares or responsibilities were left him. But, losing these, he had passed, through the discipline of struggle and pain, into touch with humanity itself. It is the eyes that have looked pain in the face until the meaning of those inexorable lines have slowly shadowed itself forth before

their straining gaze, that see below the surface in the struggling lives around them. It is the hands that have wrestled inch by inch and hour by hour with despair by which the burden, large or small, which weighs upon the hearts of all men here can be most gently and most pitifully lightened. Most gently, most pitifully, and most unconsciously. To the man who has read one sentence in the book of life, the years that follow are one unceasing struggle to spell out yet other words upon the page which he will some day understand in full perfection. The daily duties brought by life are the means by which the struggle carries itself on, unknown and unsuspected, in proportion as the nature of the man is deep and still.

North's life, in one sense, was over. It was a natural instinct that prompted him to begin the life that lay before him, still, in a new country. It was a natural impulse that prompted him to place the seal of material distance upon that infinitely deeper distance that lay between him and the woman whom he loved. So that he had work, it mattered not at all to him where that work lay. He heard of a life appointment vacant in India ; applied for, and obtained it.

The love that fears to suffer ; the love that says, " We will not meet again, we cannot bear the pain ! " ; is but a faint recollection of the love that says, " We will part. We will loose each other's hands bravely, knowing that in that last touch we have gained strength to live ! "

That he and Eve Karlake must meet once again was a thought that lay deep and inarticulate in North's heart. But the word which brought them face to face came not from him, but from her. She wrote to him. She knew that he was going, she said, and would he come to her before he went ?

It was a cold June afternoon, a week before he sailed, when they stood together for the last time. They met

very quietly, talked, as people will when there is that passing within before which speech must fail, of surface matters; of his appointment, of his voyage, of her plans for the coming winter; their voices rising and falling with level monotony, their faces very still. Then there came a pause. It was broken by Lady Karlake, and as she spoke her voice caught a little for the first time.

"Did you ever know," she said, "that I went to see her?"

There was no need of any name. North Branston started slightly and looked at her.

"No," he said.

She told him in a few brief words of her visit to Mrs. Vallotson, and then there was another pause. And in the pause North rose silently. Lady Karlake rose also. Their faces were quite white now. The last moment was at hand, and they knew it. Then, quite suddenly, she spoke, her eyes fixed full upon him.

"You said life held a purpose," she said. "What did you mean? Our hearts are broken and our lives are spoilt. You have been stronger always than I. If there is any meaning in the ghastly riddle of our existence, make me see it."

It was the supreme appeal of a soul long dormant struggling towards consciousness through agony and darkness; and the soul in North Branston rose to answer it.

"I cannot make you see it," he said steadily. "Life must do that."

"Life!" she said; there was a sharp note of anguish in her voice, but her eyes looked into his as though she read there more than his man's lips could utter. "What does life mean for us!"

"Just that," he answered gently. "Learning to understand."

"How?"

"By patience," he answered. "Patience with ourselves; patience with the lives about us; patience with the darkness which is the shadow cast by light."

Her breath was coming quickly and heavily, and for a moment she did not speak. The strained demand of her face had broken up, softened into a yearning, difficult perception. At last she moved. She stretched out both her hands towards him.

"I am behind you!" she said. "A long, long way behind. For myself I only feel the darkness. But I see the light through you!"

THE END.

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